Song of a Broken World: A Study on *NieR: Automata*'s Presentation of Argument

by

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Abstract

This thesis examines *NieR: Automata*, a video game published in 2017 on PlayStation 4 from a narratological perspective to see how it composes its narrative elements to make an excellent argument about existence. The director Yōkō Tarō argues that, we could and should exert our agency to make the choice in our life, thus this is how we grant our life meaning. This thesis aims at providing a relatively comprehensive analysis on *Automata*'s profound understanding and presentation of Sartre's existentialism, its ingenious narrative construction, and the close association between them, through a contextualization on Sartre's existentialism, and a game components analysis.

Yōkō takes his works as exploration on the usual themes and elements in the video games like violence and life, and *Automata* becomes his answer to one's life. From a comprehensive demonstration involving *Automata*'s game and narrative structure, we could clearly see that these two aspects are built so closely – all the game components are all associated with its central argument about existence and agency, and affirming or enhancing it from different perspectives, including its game systems, playthrough process, maps and stages, et cetera.

Automata's argument shows a reflection on Japanese's collective recognition of self, which evidently received much influence from Sartre's Existentialism, a western philosophy view, suggesting a globalizing trend in the Japanese cultural context. *Automata* also gives a fine example for narrative game and illustrates that video game could be a persuasive lesson of argument in reality as well. By applying this literary study on *Automata*, this thesis also aims to provide an example for similar narrative studies on video games in the future.

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Dedication

To my dear father and brother,

who introduced me to the realm of games.

Chapter 1 Alien Manifestation: Introduction

In 2017, Square Enix published an action role-playing game (RPG), *NieR: Automata*, on PlayStation 4, which was produced by PlatinumGame and directed by Yōkō Tarō (referred to as *Automata* hereinafter). It has had impressive performance in both business and critic fields – over six million copies have been sold and it has won many awards over these several years. *Automata* provided its players with a large amount of narrative and gameplay content, told a story of Android soldiers and their journey in a ruined world. In this thesis, I will mainly look at how *Automata* makes its argument around one's agency through its narrative constructions. The success of *Automata* not only relies on its profound comprehension and argument about agency, but also largely attributes to its way of presenting this argument and narrative. Unlike other games which take gameplay as the first priority, Yōkō addresses narrative as the central component of his work, using various game mechanisms to ensure that his argument is most solid and persuasive. In brief, *Automata* argues that the only way to interpret one's existence is to find it out through one's own action and choices; furthermore, such persuasive argument mainly comes from the construction of narrative components of *Automata*, the support from gameplay systems and other special features in video games.

Automata presents its audiences with a delicate and impressive illustration of the importance of agency and choice. The director Yōkō Tarō described a sorrowful and distant world of Androids and Machines, which expanded an in-depth discussion on the agency and meaning of life. The story of *Automata* begins with an Android squad on their mission, flying from the satellite base to the Earth. The protagonists – 2B, 9S and A2, are Android soldiers belonging to a special Android army called "YoRHa" units, which aimed at taking the Earth

back from the hands of alien invaders and their weapons "Machine Lifeforms." Being covered by a piece of cloth with an appealing art style and enjoyable combat system, the core argument and story of *Automata* are to question our very own existence: what is the significance of life? Yōkō argued in *Automata* that we could only become men through our own choices – which, obviously, is a claim with a strong hint of existentialism. This theme of existence is not strange in fictional works, especially in science fictions. When digital games approach this theme as a narrative form, they have a unique feature – interactivity, which allows audiences – players – to express their ideas and thoughts on the narrative through various ways, even influencing or alternating it. Further, I argue that *Automata* adopts a philosophical approach to the individual which is quite different from a "traditional" view of the individual as integrated into a community. The game does this to emphasise the need for each individual to choose his or her own path. I argue that the very structure of the game, consisting of many opportunities for the player to choose a path for the game character, serves as a lesson in the consequences and necessity of choice. In this way, the game argues for the importance of individual responsibility and agency.

I will present my thesis in several sections. First, I will define the terms I will be using, and establish parameters for thinking about individuals and agency in an existentialist perspective. I will contrast this with a traditional Japanese setting that places the individual in a context of community. This will give us a background context to consider how *Automata* creates its argument about individual agency. Through retrospection into past examination on how Japanese people look at themselves, we could learn that, they used to consider one as a component of a larger collection, to define one by his or her relationship with others, or by

different layers of dynamics and interactions between one and one's surroundings. Which could be traced to the hierarchical structure of Japanese society in ancient era, and formed a collective environment as the result. With a reference to Doi Takeo's study on the dependence(amae), we could see that the Japanese self is "formed" by different social contexts. Also, from what presented in *Automata*, we could see that there is quite a difference between its argument and this Japanese cognition about self, which is more resonating with Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism. He argued that, there was no meaning of existence in the beginning – no pre-existing goal or instruction was prepared for a man to tell him what kind of person he wanted to be (Sartre, 2007, pp. 42-45). Nevertheless, he could entitle his essence through the act of making choices. Thus, through this affirmation of values in the process, the man obtained the meaning of his existence. In the beginning, both the Androids and Machines were beings whose "essence preceded existence" – Machines were the weapons created by aliens to invade the Earth, while Androids were the performers of humanity, assistants of Project Gestalt, and the protectors of human civilization. They are like tools crafted to serve a particular objective. However, for the Machines, things changed after they killed their creators, aliens. In their internal network, on the one hand, they continued executing their creators' wish to prolong the war with Androids; while on the other hand, they intentionally separated some entities from the network. From this point, their pre-determined essence had been fading away, and those Machines separated from the network did not have any initial essence – in other words, their existence preceded their essence. In End D, players would find out that the personal data (including memories recorded after the separation) of every Machine breaking away from the network was still stored in the database of its network. In other words, these Machines were

experiments done in the network on the argument that "existence precedes essence". Their answer to this argument, on the one hand, affirmed this idea, as they did break away from their innate identity as weapons; while on the other hand, their limitation was also pointed out– such essence ought not to be solely borrowed from others' ideas, but must be found out through one's own actions instead. Moreover, these ideas were corresponding to *Automata*'s construction as well, which would be further discussed in the next chapter.

In Chapter 3, I would show how "game" and "play" are combined to express the central argument of this work, referring to Ian Bogost's unit operation on how the individual part works together, Jenkins' theory on the environmental storytelling, as well as various discussion on the agency presented in the game. Marie-Laure Ryan has indicated that, "the choice of medium makes a difference as to what stories can be told, how they are told, and why they are told. (29, 2014)". In the case of video game, this difference becomes much distinctive and significant due to its association to a wide range of media, and particular mechanism – the interactivity and variation brought by it. *Automata* also give us a brilliant example for narrative game, an indicator about how to bring the game's potential into full play as the medium. Comparing to other works in recent years, *Automata*'s attempts in investigating narrative game's potential is also significant. From its positioning of player in the game, to its environmental storytelling, *Automata* chose to involve player as a central narrator, the announcer or host on the stage, which is an innovative step in studying the player's position in the game. Although *Automata* is presented with characters of an appealing visual art style with vivid personalities, its argument about agency and life rather than the "traditional" collective orientation frequently appears in other Japanese games, which resort to people's unconditionally mutual

understanding and relationship without apparent reasons. Yōkō rejected those solutions of simply replying all the questions with answers like "people's connections" without carefully considering their various context, which avoided the central focus of the work and its argument. *Automata*'s response resonates more with opinion of Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism, with a profound autopsy on its various components like definition and contextualization, et cetera. To a certain degree, this reference indicates an open and globalizing trend – people choose to seek answers not only from the ideas and beliefs of their birthplace. It is a quite promising and inspiring signal, since it indicates that people are reflecting on and even criticizing their common cognition formed before. Moreover, the argument of *Automata* is a succession to Yōkō's past discussions and arguments featured on the game, triumph, killing as well as their significance for us people. If glancing at Yōkō's previous works, from *Drakengard* to *Automata*, we would learn that in fact, there is an obvious and successive sequence of arguments and thoughts in them. At the same time, he also made a variety of attempts in the potential of video games in narratives. As a result, *Automata* becomes his answer to the question about "looming death"– after exploring the violence and killing in *Drakengard* and *NieR: Replicant* from different perspectives meanwhile answering that they would only lead to the loss of all in *Drakengard 3* as a temporary conclusion, Yōkō continued this inquiry and reached the final response to such loss.

Yōkō's discussion and argument in *Automata* is inspired not only by the ideas and philosophy in reality, but also his past exploration of the common themes and components in video games – his much preferred narrative form (Saijo, 2018). In this form, audiences – players – can actively influence and even change the story plot. In this case, this interactive

feature not only aligns with the central argument of *Automata*, but also presents a more divergent and profound story to audiences in the end. As he has stressed many times in different interviews that, his initial motivation to devote himself to the game industry was to make innovative stories, so as to explore the digital game's potential in storytelling (Kishi, 2017; Saijo, 2018). Indeed, to take a general view of the four role-playing games that he is in charge of, none of them shows any hesitation in involving controversial or unwelcome elements and factors either in story or mechanism designation. In some extreme cases, both – not to mention a team consisting of four people with disturbing personalities in *Drakengard*, or the rhythm music game with no visual clue at all in End D of *Drakengard 3*, or forcing the players to delete their game files for a certain ending in *Replicant/Gestalt*. Yōkō never seems to hesitate to involve controversial or disturbing content in the story, and his stories are always brimming with extremely depressing atmospheres, plot and distressing endings. The involvement of these elements is actually the director's exploration of some issues related to human nature and the game.

Regarding Yōkō's previous works, *Automata*, to a certain degree, is a succession to his prior discussions on the issue of the meaning and significance, which appeared in his previous works. For a better understanding of Yōkō's creation context, this section will take a view of the most influential and important three works – *Drakengard* (2003), *NieR: Replicant/Gestalt* (2010) and *Drakengard 3* (2014) – and perform a simple analysis of their ideas and arguments, with a brief mention of their expressions. There is a thematic connection among Yōkō's works between belief and meaning, determinism and existence (Turcev, 2018). Turcev summarized them as Yōkō's investigation and argument on the human nature itself and "the individual,

overwhelmed by his failures, shortcomings and mistakes (2018, p. 182)." Regarding the concrete representation in the works, it is reliable to say that besides the nature of humans, he also questions the existence, position, and impact of the "player" in the game as a narrative medium. In other words, it also represents Yōkō's attempt to explore the functions of the game and play in the narrative context. Among Yōkō's works, its progression is mainly presented in the thematic arguments and thoughts. At the end of *R/G*, all the attempts and efforts made are lost in vain – a consequence reached by the characters' actions. This time, the result becomes the premise – the protagonist has known the consequence and impact of her actions in the beginning. Either she succeeded in bringing death to her Intoner sisters and a massive amount of people, or the Flower absorbed enough power from them and brought devastation to all human beings. Differing from Nier's ignorance to the consequence of his actions, Zero is utterly aware of her objective and means, yet this "omniscience" does not grant her any reassurance, only a pre-determined and unavoidable ending of death. The thematic content and discussion of *Drakengard* 3 centres on is the ultimate ending of every being: the death and elimination of everything. However, in this work, Yōkō did not answer the question about what was laid after the ultimate elimination of everything since it became the main discussion topic in his subsequent work and left the work to *Automata*.

Chapter 2 Birth of a Wish: Existence and Agency of *Automata*

In his analysis on GTAIII, Ian Bogost argues that the freedom in the game is the recognition of one's inner "demon", that this freedom is always concerning the criminality (156-157). In which indicates that, the freedom provided by the game has a tendency in the first place, or at least partially, a preference on a certain opinion, argument or even ideology. Thus, how about *Automata*? Turcev calls *Automata* an "autopsy on existence" due to its examination of one's meaning, which is presented almost everywhere in the game (2019). *Automata*'s ambition in discussing a philosophical preposition has been revealed in the very beginning: even a merchant on a campsite would ask questions about the relationship between his body parts and self-identity or suspect what his job would bring in the end. In the previous brief description of *Automata* in the Introduction chapter, we mentioned its attempts to discuss the existence and its association with existentialism and relevant terms like agency and subjectivity. Thus, this section would mainly be focused on the contextualization of *Automata*, especially in one's existence and agency.

2.1 Interpreting Existence

From previous descriptions, it is difficult not to associate them with a particular philosophy – existentialism, since they did share many similar or common points here in the argument and worldbuilding. In the case of *Automata*, its reference to the functions of choice and agency bear a strong resemblance to the ideas of Existentialism, especially to Jean-Paul Sartre's arguments and opinions. To keep the discussion concise and specific, the existentialism we examine here would refer to Sartre's existentialism or his existential humanism. As for the

deep association between *Automata* and Sartre's existentialism, in this thesis, we would only talk about it under this context – in other words, I am going to find out what exactly Sartre referred to when he mentioned this term. Certainly, the following discussion would centre around his article *Existentialism is a Humanism.* This article, as his response to many different critiques of existentialism, has significant importance in understanding his philosophical arguments. Thus, in the following paragraphs, I would like to have a close look at this work to summarize what exact argument he made, and by reading it, we could see how Yōkō interpreted one's existence and agency in *Automata*, and how they align with the existentialism thoughts.

2.1.1 Japanese Self and Agency

When we talk about a Japanese cognition of self, it is much more difficult to be separated from the collective or society. Gordon Mathews pointed out two adjectives, "contextual" and "sociocentric," as well (1996, p. 719), which are significant features of the Japanese view and cognition of self. Meanwhile, the family is a crucial constituent part of this cognition. Thus, it is not difficult to see where this obsessiveness is from. Regarding the definition of self in a Japanese context, Bachnik summarized that: "the Japanese self is defined socially, by engaging in concrete social relationships and the ability to shift appropriately among different social situations. Japanese social order is defined by the inclusion of self (as "organic"), through concrete social situations, and by the organization of shifts among social situations, characterized by "relativity," "situationalism," or "situational shifts," "Upon closer inspections, self and social order appear to be flip sides of the same coin. If so, social order cannot be defined without including the self, any more than self can be defined without including the

social order" (1992, p. 4). Although she has expressed some concerns about how exactly this order and relationship were defined, it is evident that the Japanese self largely depends on its social context. Yet, it might be difficult to say whether these arguments are an actual phenomenon, stereotype or prejudice at present. For instance, the simple division between "west" and "east" was criticized at the end of the 20th century, due to a concern about the tendency of orientalism and occidentalism (Cangia, 2010). A study on the cultural stereotype suggests that Japanese culture code, norms and values might be more difficult for foreign people to understand (Soutar, Grainger & Hedges, 1999, p. 213). Yet, these concerns mainly focus on the methodologies and attribution followed by them, and their result remains unchanged: simply considering the collective and individual views on people and social relationships, most of them agree that, in the case of Japan, the former one occupies a dominant position in people's cognition, and the influence of this ideology does not exist or manifests in the people's recognition or appreciation of collective values and ideology. Modern popular culture and its products also do not escape from their impact. For instance, although Matsumoto's study was performed around half a century ago, its examination is still valid – its question and evidence has remained unchanged until the present. Thus, it is acceptable to look at how the scholars describe this Japanese cognition of self here.

This cognition might be originated from its social form – the agricultural society in the ancient era, which took family as its fundamental social unit since this structure could guarantee essential agricultural productivity (Matsumoto, 1960). It is an "oligarchic social order based on a deeply ingrained philosophy of moral duties and social obligations," where every person belongs to a particular social position assigned by their occupation and family origin with a

pyramid-shaped hierarchy (Matsumoto, 1960, p. 13), which is a significant impact and remnant left by feudalism and its ideology. When we mention feudalism here, obviously, we are not talking solely about the political construction or the government, which have been existing in this land for many years. Although they already vanished hundreds of years ago, their impact is still left here – the approval and praise for the collective cognition and strict social and interpersonal hierarchical structure, which is continued to modern days and changed into other forms, operating in terms of allegiance or association to schools and workplaces, et cetera. Like the juniors have to use honorific language when speaking to seniors, people still follow the route with the past dependence on the collective communities, with no trace of weakening at all. However, as industrialization and urbanization progress, the importance of the individual has manifested gradually – the urban environment and industries offer the residents more options for earning a living (Matsumoto, p. 6). Moreover, Matsumoto argued that acknowledging individual values originated from Christianity and referred to Weber's claim on the ideological base of modern Western life (1960, p. 7). Considering the collective orientation in Japan, it is no wonder that individualism was strongly neglected and opposed in society. After the late 19th century, the studies were aimed at Japanese characters from a more national perspective, inspecting them from linguistics, psychology, and other anthropological aspects (Cangia, 2010). After WWII, the Nihonjinron *(日本人論)* had become a popular research topic and theory in this field among Japanese scholars. This theory stressed the uniqueness of Japan and investigated the cultural, national, and social identities of Japanese people mainly through the comparison between western (European/North American) and Japanese people (Cangia, 2010). For instance, Matsumoto's work mainly emphasizes the

formation of the Japanese self and its social context, attempting to deduct its origin (1960). There are also other works on indicating and examining terms like "Japanese self" and their uniqueness (Doi, 1973; Rosenberg, 1992; Smith, 1983). And indeed, almost every social group (including the country) wanted to present itself as unique somehow, and the popularity of Nihonjinron received much resistance in spaces outside Japan (Cangia, 2010; Iles, personal communication). Nevertheless, this kind of studies do have validity to a certain degree, considering their sociology and cultural context. This social study showed that in the mid-20th century (post-war period), people believed that Japan's social environment was still in a dominant collectivist atmosphere, which was presented in many spheres like family and community life as well as occupational and political groups (Matsumoto, 1960, p. 59). Later, referring to another experiment on the value stereotypes view of Japanese people held in 1999, this recognition seemed not to change much (Soutar, Grainger & Hedges, 1999). However, especially in works written by European and American authors, it was hard to say whether they made an assumption about Japanese people's cognition patterns first and collected their evidence for this dichotomy or not. Not far from the end of WWII, the researchers seemed to have already reached a commonsense that the Japanese society presented an explicitly collective atmosphere and a great emphasis on the community over the individual, which might attribute to the transition from a pre-modern agricultural society to the modern industrial one (Matsumoto, 1960, p. 7). In addition, Matsumoto's research showed that even after the modernization and introduction of western culture brought by the Meiji Restoration, the collective orientation in Japanese society still occupied a dominant position (1960). Nevertheless, the self and individual, and their relationship with community and society, have

never ceased in people's discussion.

Referring to Rosenberg's three dimensions of "a Japanese self," a self could be concluded in three relationships: one's relationship with oneself, other people, and society. For the first layer, the *ki* itself might not be as reliable as other concepts. When it comes to the internal psychological state or other thoughts, to bring out this spiritual ki and take it as a crucial factor in the demonstration process seems not to be a piece of quite solid evidence. Doi explained *ki* as a word or a word stem to describe the internal emotions and mental activities such as judgment, will, and cognition (Doi, 1973). To explain from this angle, the *ki*'s impact on the formation of Japanese self is more like one's perception of his surroundings and own will, as well as the volition towards them. For the second dimension, the self also occurs on the shifting position of giving and taking indulgence (*甘やかす amayakasu/甘える amaeru*) in the interpersonal relationship. In this cycle of giving and taking, the interpersonal relationship is established with the mutual responsibilities for each other, "the sympathies of another person frame any enactment of free will so that present positions of freedom imply movement toward positions of responsibility later" (Rosenberger, 1992, p. 69). The circle of giving and taking indulgence part, or in other words, the process of an interactive "amae," could be taken as a significant feature in understanding Japanese view of self and its relationship to the social context, largely thanks to Doi Takeo's work on this terminology. In *Amae no Kozo* (*Anatomy of Dependence*), Doi Takeo analyses the *amae* based on various disciplines, including psychological, sociological and even linguistic perspectives. In the English version, the *amae* is translated to "dependence," which is not a perfectly-fitted word – "dependence" is more like *izon* (*依存*), meaning the act that one relies on other(s) for living. Although this psychological

state is a general phenomenon that does not manifest in people from a particular area exclusively, it is still a characteristic feature of Japanese people's psychological cognition from Doi's perspective (1973). Its psychological prototype came from the relationship between infant and mother: after the infant perceived self and mother as two separated beings, he would seek to rely on her (Kakimoto, 2009, p. 40). The word *amaeru* suggested an implicit expectation for the partner to fulfill one's own demands. The *amae* phenomenon artificially creates a harmonic atmosphere in which people connect to each other, excluding the separation that assuredly existed in reality (Doi, 1973). According to Doi's suggestion, a significant Japanese feature of the thinking pattern was the extreme appreciation of a closed interpersonal relationship (1973). He argued that this is also another presentation of the *amae* mindset. This closedness referred to the *uchi/soto* concept mentioned in previous paragraphs, which meant that if someone never joined one's circle, then he was never related to the one, always be an outsider to this person (Doi, 1973). In that social context, it might not be difficult to see why people used to equal freedom with selfishness then – to be "free" might mean being irresponsible to other people in the same community. For the third layer, the different social contexts helped with the positioning of self as well, such as in/out (*uchi*/*soto*) and back/front (*ura*/*omote*), which described one's position in different groups of people. (Rosenberger, 1992, pp. 68-69). It requires great awareness of self to know one's stands in terms of the social hierarchy, and this awareness could be shaped through one's social life and interpersonal communication. Indeed, the inside and outside context of interpersonal relationships was a significantly influential factor in understanding this social context since traditional Japanese society is composed of two aspects: *giri* (moral obligation and duties) and *ninjo* (human

emotions and flavours) (Matsumoto, 1960, p. 9). People belonged to different groups in their life in society, and people would act formally in an outer and public circle(*soto*), much respecting the deference. In addition, the inner context (*uchi*) encourages people to show the "weak" side and form a more emotional and informal intimate relationship with others in the same circle. These features are also reflected in the Japanese language. Smith approached this issue from the use of honorific language in Japanese language (*keigo*) and the lack of remotely resembling personal pronouns (1983). Keigo is a kind of Japanese speech that shows respect to one's conversation partner, usually and widely applied in situations like elders and youths in family, teachers and students in school as well as leaderships and subordinates in workplaces, et cetera. In Smith's inspection, it revealed the importance of social status and position in Japanese people's cognition, that the status differentiation appeared in nearly every conversation, even if the two sides of it were of the same social level – men tended to use a more inferior form to another man partner, while women used superior form more (Smith, 1983, p. 75). Thus, he concluded that self-identification of Japanese people was "indeterminate in the sense that there is no fixed center from which, in effect, the individual asserts a noncontingent existence" (Smith, 1983, p. 81).

Thus, regardless of what composes the Japanese view of self, its formation is undoubtedly attributed to the communities and one's position in them. Doi even argued that in Japan, there was no individual freedom outside of the community and no recognition of the values in personality (1973). Matsumoto suggested that an extremely high involvement in the community activities led to the limitation of individual rights and interests, which could be revealed in the use of "*kojin*," "*jiyuu*," and other words with individual colour in Japanese

language. Words to describe self-orientation were usually associated with the meaning of selfishness, non-social and even anti-social attitudes and behaviours (Matsumoto, p. 60). Like *keigo* stresses the differences in social position, words about individual freedom and rights are considered negative, mainly associated with selfishness (Kakimoto, 2009).

In summary, from these discussions above, we could see that there is indeed a transition in people's recognition of self in the contemporary Japanese context, from the past dominant collective context to a more individual one. Actually, studies on the so-called "Japanese self" mainly start from the 20th century, indicating that people do not treat this idea as important as in the past. Yōkō did not take these past ideas directly to answer the questions about one's existence, who even denied some of them to a certain degree through the character's actions in the story. This is a combination of philosophical ideas from different cultures and areas, whose result is quite persuasive in the end. Thus, we could see that, if *Automata* follows this procedure and interpret the existence in a more "traditional Japanese" way, thus, it would focus on one's position in a community or collection of people. However, from what is expressed and demonstrated in the work, obviously, *Automata* did not follow this route. This way of defining one's existence is only one option, or possibility in it. What it resonates is more like the argument made by the existentialism, a more "western" philosophical idea.

2.1.2 Humanism and Existentialism

Sartre explained his existentialism as "a doctrine that makes human life possible and also affirms that every truth and every action imply an environment and a human subjectivity" in his lecture "Existentialism is a Humanism" (p. 18). His explanation began with that there were

two existentialisms: Christian existentialism and atheistic existentialism. People used to be confused with them, which led to misunderstandings of his ideas as well as arguments. The previous one, according to Sartre, assumed that an omniscient creator was behind all existence. Like a craftsman knows what he will make, the God creates men with a certain, predestined purpose. "The paper knife is thus both an object produced in a certain way and one that, on the other hand, serves a certain purpose. We cannot suppose that a man would produce a paper knife without knowing what purpose it would serve (Sartre, 2007, p. 20-21)". For the tool created for a sole purpose like a hammer or scissors, their essence precedes existence – before being used or even crafted by people, their goal has already been decided. In other words, their objective and meaning of existence have already been decided before birth. For them, the essence precedes existence – or "production precedes essence" (p. 21). The relationship between God and men follows a similar pattern:

> …when God creates he knows exactly what he is creating. Thus the concepts of man, in the mind of god, is comparable to the concept of the paper knife in the mind of the manufacturer: God produces man following certain techniques and a conception, just as the craftsman, following a definition and a technique, produces a paper knife. Thus each individual man is the realization of a certain concept within the divine intelligence… the essence of man precedes his historically primitive existence in nature. (pp. 21-22)

Theistic existentialism assumes that people's nature (essence) is pre-determined. Since people are created in the God's form and image, it is natural to assume that the essence is also from it. Or in other words, they have to follow the signs given by this God without any doubt or suspicion – people are created in the most idealistic figure; they only need to imitate the God to reach the real and "full" men. On the other hand, the other existentialism, which was

approved by Sartre, it argued that if the God does not exist, then there must be a being who "exists before he can be defined by any concept of it" – the man (Sartre, 2007, p. 22). The atheistic existentialism, just like its name, does not believe that people are born with a presupposed purpose or any pre-established concept or paradigm of a "proper" man in the world. Thus, if the God is absent from the world, namely, people would not have a perfect example before them, then they are born into this world without a "good" innate nature. Since there is no place of God in the world, and "there is no sign in the world, nor a general ethic code could tell man what ought to do", then the choices and actions taken by one could only be out of his or her own will rather than other people's direction (Sartre, 2007, p. 19; p. 33). Indeed, there are many other explanations or codes for attributing people's life and significance. If we take a close look at the story of *Automata*, we could find that there is no better choice than existentialism – a post-apocalyptic stage which could align with Sartre's idea. In this context, "the other direction" does not exist at all – the world is left in ruins, and they have to respond to this question on their own. It becomes a natural advantage of providing a much more proper stage for discussing the existence itself.

The "choice" here, refers to taking actions in real life, such as "to join a Christian trade union" or "to become a Communist". In this case, making a choice means that a person decides to support the resignation way of living for men (Sartre, 2007, p. 24). So actually, according to his argument, rather than denying the existence of the God, this idea would not change whether it exists or not – the God gives no help in people's pursuit of their own existence, even though he does give out signs to direct them, and the right of interpretation is still held in people's hands:

> … man is responsible for what he is. Thus, the first effect of existentialism is to make every man conscious of what he is, and to make him solely responsible for himself. And when we say that man is responsible only for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men. (Sartre, 2007, p. 23)

Thus, people have to build themselves and be completely responsible for what a man should be like – people are different from objects or tools. According to Sartre, the significance and objective of a man's life should not be decided by other than himself through his own actions or choices. Thus, he argued that "if the existence does precede essence, the man could never explain his action by a known personality" – man ought to find answers in himself (2007, p. 29). Sartre also argued that one's existence was defined by his own behaviour, "he is nothing more than the sum of his actions", "man is nothing hut a series of enterprises, and that he is the sum, organization, and aggregate of the relations that constitute such enterprises" (2007, p. 37; p. 38). Thus, why did Sartre associate his existentialism so closely with humanism, just like the title of this lecture? Humanism was not an extremely specific term either: Oxford English Dictionary even indicated six different sub-definitions, which was only a fraction of its context. In the context of this thesis, this term should be "any system of thought or ideology which places humans, or humanity as a whole, at its centre (OED)." Then from this perspective, it is reasonable to assume that if an existentialist wants to discuss the meaning with human as the subject, then this philosophical idea could be taken as a humanistic idea or at least have a close relationship with it. Actually, when referring to others' opinions on humanism, we could find that Sartre's point resonates with them in a certain way, such as Richard Hoenigswald's discussion over this issue (1948). In the article *On Humanism*, Hoenigswald discussed

humanism from its formation and development under the impact of various scholars as well as movements like the Renaissance, during which the thinkers inquired about and affirmed man's capabilities meanwhile admiring one's innate claims to values as well. Therefore, people ought to be trained humanistically, which would lead to their recognition of their individual values and the ability to express them, "there, man as the responsible architect of his own destiny; here man lifted above his own natural existence by virtue of his 'labor upon himself'…" (1948, p. 49). Thus, in other words, then the man would become an "autonomous vehicle of culture". For instance,

> …Suspicion of any objective hierarchy of values, the urge to clear one's relationship with one's objective surroundings through the autonomous action of self-consciousness, furthermore the power of the spoken word as such, the confidence in the effects of speech between man and man… (Hoenigswald, 1948, p. 43)

This is the humanistic attitude suggested and approved by him. Certainly, to have resembling discussions does not mean that its interpretation must be the same. Even Sartre himself admitted that, he criticized humanism as a kind of fallacy in his previous work *Nausea* but still picked it up here (2007, p. 51). His later explanation in the lecture was that the humanism he approved and the one he criticized were not the same. Just like the two kinds of existentialism he indicated earlier, he also suggested two interpretations of this word which caused critiques on his different attitudes towards "humanism." The one he disapproved was to blindly take humanity itself as a worshipped object:

> …we might mean a theory that takes man as an end and as the supreme value…I nevertheless still benefit from the plane's invention and, as a man, I should consider

> myself responsible for, and honoured by, what certain other men have achieved. This presupposes that we can assign a value to man based on the most admirable deeds of certain men… (Sartre, 2007, p. 52)

In addition, he also believed that such humanism, which was constructed on the worship of humanity itself, would eventually lead to fascism – in this context, this reference ought to be understood as an unconditional affirmation and acknowledgment of all men's doing, which is an absolute determination on the correctness of being a person alone, regardless of what he does. Here, we could clearly see the contradiction of this opinion with his previous argument about the real meaning and value of one's life. In addition, following this logic and procedure, it could be acceptable to judge humanity as an evil species as well: if one could share other people's achievements that have no direct relationship with him or her, then why could he or she be separated from others' faults? Thus, this is the humanism he criticized in *Nausea*. The humanism he approved did not consider man as an end or believe that human was something we could worship. It should mean people's transcendence, "man is always outside of himself, and it is in projecting and losing himself beyond himself that man is realized; and, on the other hand, it is in pursuing transcendent goals that he is able to exist" (Sartre, 2007, p. 52). Compared to the other explanation, this one appears more challenging to understand. The transcendence refers to that man passes beyond himself; and the subjectivism means that man is not an island unto himself but is always present in a human universe (Sartre, 2007, p. 53). Thus, based on this existential humanism, he argued that:

> …we remind man that there is no legislator other than himself and that he must, in his abandoned state, make his own choices, and also because we show that it is not by turning inward, but by constantly seeking a goal outside of himself in the form

> of liberation, or of some special achievement, that man will realize himself as truly human. (Sartre, 2007, p. 53)

Based on Hoenigswald's demonstration and Sartre's explanation for his terminology of humanism, we could also find many similarities between his definition and Sartre's "working definition" for humanism in his work. In other words, in this thesis, we could tentatively give a working definition of humanism for discussion as well. Referring to the previous definition of humanism and his indication about subjectivity, the terminology could be interpreted as that, people ought to seek the answer to their meaning and selves outside themselves. They have to find a higher objective in their lives, aiming at self-actualization and self-achievement, then pursuing it through their own will and action. People could only be defined by their own doing, not what they naturally are. He denied the myth of creationism and the unconditional worshipping of humanity as a unity. In brief, Sartre argued that one's existence could only be found and defined by his own behaviour and choices, which might be limited by some realistic factors but still out of his own will, carried out by his agency.

2.1.3 Subjectivity and Agency (Choice)

In the previous section, we took a brief look at existentialism and humanism, and found that Sartre's "existentialism's humanism" was composed of two aspects: transcendence and subjectivity. Suppose that this transcendence refers to the goal of humanity's development, then subjectivity here represents what people would do – their action, which comes out of their own agency and will, and that is what *Automata* particularly stressed. As we are mainly talking about people's actions here, thus, this section will focus on subjectivity and agency, together

with their context, meaning and presentation. However, just like the two terminologies in the last section, defining subjectivity and agency is not a simple task as well: there are various versions of explanation and description in its constitution, which leads to elusive terminologies in a wide range of disciplines.

The dictionary explanation for agency in *Stanford Philosophical Encyclopedia* is "the exercise or manifestation of the capacity to act" (Schlosser, 2019). Similarly, Bal defines agency as the exertion of one's power, and the one who executes it is an agent (Bal, 2017, p. 7). In addition, Wooldridge and Jennings defined "agent" as someone "who, or that which, exerts power or produces an effect" (Luck & d'Inverno, 1995, p. 256), and Schlosser describes it as "a being with the capacity to act" (2019). From these references, we could affirm that agency represents one's action to exercise his capacity to act, and the agent is the one to do so. Referring to the previous discussions, we would notice that these definitions are more likely to describe one's ability and capacity to do so, regardless of where it comes from – neither of the descriptions mentioned above of such actions or exertion has to be out of one's will. For instance, if someone is forced to carry out a mission, even though he exercises it, it is still hard to say that this action could be considered something contributing to his existence. Referring to Sartre's opinion, such action is not of his own will. However, there is still a subtle and delicate distinction between them: Schlosser stressed the action while the emphasis of the other was on the possession of the ability.

Meanwhile, Sartre's existentialism does not take the terminology of "agency" as a crucial part of his discussion. However, their similarities are quite evident according to the definitions and descriptions above. Considering its definition, it needs one to exert the agency for making

a decision or taking a voluntary action – to perform actions in reality. Crowell explained that he used "choice" to describe the perspective of an engaged agency (Crowell, 2020), in which this ambiguous word might be taken into consideration. Indeed, such wording also implies that in the existentialism context, the agency must be "engaged" with something – which, in this case, refers to one's own will (subjectivity). Also, other people indicate that there is more than a sole agency here. For instance, Luck and d'Inverno indicated that even the agents were in different categories according to their own will. The presence of this willing awareness is a much important factor while examining the agent's nature: the entities, objects, agents, and autonomous agents comprise a three-layer, hierarchical structure – all entities are objects, and some of them are agents that could have an impact on others, and among the agents, there are some autonomous agents, whose actions are exerted out of a conscious will (1995). The autonomous here, in other words, refers to self-governing (Buss & Westlund, 2018). Also, Jonathan Lowe believed that the choice of an act was the presentation of a free act of will (Pulman, 2011, p. 632). This choice might refer to one's decision to join the army or be employed in a company, or a more general description of one's action in response to his surroundings. The significance of making a choice is not merely choosing from two or more options. From Sartre's perspective, the meaning of this action is that man affirms the values and argument presented in this choice: "By the act of making a choice, the man recognized the value of the image he chosen" (1946, p. 24). In addition, when he referred to the responsibility of humans in this process, "When a man is making choice for himself, he is also making choices for all men" (1946, p. 24). Thus, Sartre explained three terms associated with existentialism's core concept and argument: anguish, abandonment and despair.

Since one ought to be responsible for one's own choice, and one's choice would also influence other people and even the entire humanity, thus people must be aware of such significance. One's awareness of this "full and profound responsibility" would inevitably lead to anguish:

> People are constantly living in anguish, since a man who commits himself, and who realizes that he is not only the individual that he chooses to be, but also a legislator choosing at the same time what humanity as a whole should be, cannot help but be aware of his own full and profound responsibility (Sartre, p. 25).

This anguish signifies the responsibility and significance of the choice, which is a permanent association and result of man's agency. This anguish is inevitable and unsolvable, always accompanied by one's action as well as choice. Yet, some may argue that it is not definite; people could still seek help from others' opinions. However, this solution does not exist in an existentialism's context. The choice has a premise – the "abandonment" of external solutions. If we refer to Sartre's argument in this speech, this abandonment refers to the non-existence of the God and "the full consequences of that assertion" (p. 27). Yet, according to the following demonstration, we could find it not only the abandonment of the God. It is actually, for all the beings with external directions and answers that men need and rely upon. This abandonment is to deny the existence of descended signs and other external assistance, leaving only men in the world, being responsible for their doing. Sartre illustrated that if someone sought advice from a priest, then he could only obtain an answer from *the Bible*. Thus, all other people's suggestions are pre-established, and to take one more step, "he would have decided beforehand what kind of advice he was about to receive (Sartre, p. 33)". It is meaningless to

seek other ones' answer to solve one's own problems, which could only be answered by oneself. People should not be dependent on other people's words, since there would be no agency at all – which would be an exertion of others' will. Moreover, this agency has a limitation called despair: losing all the hope for others, which means that one could only depend on one's own cognition and will, neither on others' actions nor his or her own expectations or wishes for others. One ought not to put his or her hope on other people or rely on other people's actions, even for the same goal, "…I will do everything in my power to make it happen. Beyond that, I cannot count on anything" (Sartre, 2007, p. 36). Being "hopeful" towards others might lead to another negation of agency – other ones might do the same thing in my stead; thus there is nothing I need to do. In other words, this is also a side reflection of the abandonment – one should only rely on oneself. Thus, these demonstrations and explanations provide an existentialism context for the choice. In brief, anguish is its result, abandonment is its premise, and despair is its limitation. They constantly associate with one's actions and choices throughout one's life. Sartre claimed that one should be completely responsible for what kind of man he was and be responsible for all men (2007, p. 24), and such responsibility must be limited to his own will with no assistance. Regarding the previous arguments about "existence precedes essence," this responsibility here means this man or the subject's contribution to afford his comprehension of what makes human through his choices. In brief, existentialists believe that human agency is present in one's choices and actions taken in reality, and this one who exerts this capacity must be autonomous – being of one's own will (Buss & Westlund, 2018).

Since the only thing that can define one's life is his own choices and actions, which comes

from and limited to subjectivity, it is easy to understand why Sartre considers subjectivity a crucial part of humanity. And the agency as one's capacity to carry out these actions, as subjectivity is where the "free will" mentioned above comes from. He claims that subjectivity is the first principle of existentialism, "Man is not only that which he conceives himself to be, but that which he wills himself to be… man is nothing than what he makes of himself" (Sartre, 2007, p. 22). He also indicated two interpretations for subjectivism: "the freedom of the individual subject to choose what he will be" and "man's inability to transcend human subjectivity" (Sartre, 2007, pp. 23-24). Like the former explanation for existentialism and humanism, the latter is what he means by subjectivity in his argument, while the former is what people commonly understand and talk about. One's action represents one's value– his doing must be out of his subjective ideas. But the existential subjectivity has another more profound meaning, that is, one's choice would have a more significant impact than this action alone:

> …When we say that man chooses himself, not only do we mean that each of us must choose himself, but also that in choosing himself, he is choosing for all men. In fact, in creating the man each of us wills ourselves to be, there is not a single one of our actions that does not at the same time create an image of man as we think he ought to be. Choosing to be this or that is to affirm at the same time the value of what we choose, because we can never choose evil. We always choose the good, and nothing can be good for any of us unless it is good for all. (Sartre, 2007, p. 24)

Although this subjectivity comes from an individual, it still influences a much wider range of people. This responsibility comes from the precedence of existence as well – which is what existentialists call "commitment", referring to being responsible for the greater. Man must realize that his doing would mean and specify his role in defining all men – and he committed to this as well, meanwhile contributing to the fashioning of all men. Thus, subjectivity is the

premise of choice (agency), and the choice determines one's existence. In this context, if one wants to give one's life a meaning, then according to the existentialists' ideas, we have to grant it with an objective and corresponding action – the former comes from subjectivity and the latter from choice. In addition, this choice must be made after careful deliberation, as it is not only a simple selection but represent one's approval of a particular action. To make a choice is to define humanity based on one's own ideas. In brief, this subjectivity is a "limited and responsible freedom" – people could act freely out of their own will; however, this freedom is also limited to one's will. In addition, when someone is exerting this subjectivity, he should realize that its exertion would not only impact his own life but also make his interpretation as well as definition of the existence of humans.

When it comes to the reality, it is not difficult to feel one's agency; however, things go differently in a literary or narrative work – like Bal suggested, the agency in narrative usually appeared in the character(actor)'s actions: speaking, looking and acting (Bal, 2017, p. 28), and this agency would be a matter of fact which was limited to the text. Even the video game, which requires the involvement of the player in the very beginning, could not allow a complete exertion of one's agency due to technical and other limitations. Yet *Automata* still submits a satisfying answer to the expression of this theme – the audience could clearly get its point in many different ways. In the following demonstration, I would mainly focus on *Automata*'s diegetic presentation and discussion on the agency – or in other words, what the story and characters tell themselves.

2.2 Examining Meaning

In previous paragraphs, I have briefly mentioned that *Automata*'s context and argument had a close relationship with existentialism, especially associated with Sartre's opinions on the world and individuals. Thus, this section will examine how *Automata* presents its argument in its plot and narrative design and certain Japanese cultural traits shown here through the characters' actions in this context (stage). At the diegetic level, *Automata*'s presentation of the agency is not as evident or explicit as its reference to existentialism due to its system and gameplay design – which I will further discuss in the next part of this thesis. Turcev took Camus's absurdity and rebellion as the main components of the argument in *Automata*, and I agree with this idea. Turcev's analysis shows that *Automata*'s discussion on one's existence has three layers/steps: nature aspiration, absurdity and rebellion (2019), which clearly have a deep association with Camus's claim about absurdity. But I must add here that Sartre's opinions work in more ways than only the "existentialist and essentialist" mentioned by Turcev, and has a much closer relationship with the major part of the diegetic content of *Automata*.

Referring to the previous discussion, humanoid robots and machines have never been strangers to the fantasy works, neither are they a good method to discuss some philosophical issues, like the classical binary question about body and soul in *Ghost in the Shell* (Oshii, 1995) – it questions the position of one's existence, whether in the body or the "ghost". Just like its title, *Automata* told a story about a group of mechanical beings, Androids and Machine Lifeforms (hereinafter referred to as Machines). Our protagonists, YoRHa No.2 Type B (2B) and No.9 Type S (9S), belonged to an Android force called YoRHa, whose base "Bunker" was built on a satellite. Thousands of years ago, aliens invaded the Earth and chased the remaining

humans to the moon. Then, those people established the Humanity Council and built Androids to fight back for them, hoping to retrieve their home someday… or so the story is told. As soldiers, they carried out various missions on the Earth and gradually found out the truth behind this eventual war between Androids and Machines. Through one mission after another, 2B and 9S found that more and more Machines exhibited various unexpected traits – emotions, memory and thoughts – even some even obtained humanoid appearance. Furthermore, as the story turned out, 9S found that YoRHa's establishment was utterly based on a lie. Humanity went extinct thousands of years ago, and the Project YoRHa aimed at the developing of the "next" generation of combating type Androids and covering the lie of the extinction of humanity – they were manufactured as "sacrificial lambs", designed to die at the very beginning. In its previous work, *NieR: Replicant/Gestalt* (*R/G*), its two subtitles (on different platforms) worked as two keywords in the work, specifically referring to the two sides of the story. The antagonists were "Gestalt," whose soul was separated from their body; the protagonists were "Replicant," whose consciousness was generated in the separated body. Unlike that case, this work's title "automata" did not appear anywhere in the story as a critical key term. The characters in *Automata* could be divided into two forces: the Androids (protagonists) and Machines (antagonists). The word "automaton" means "a moving device having a concealed mechanism, so it appears to operate spontaneously," or "a machine which resembles and is able to simulate the actions of a human being" (OED). Actually, this title could be used to perfectly describe all characters – both the protagonists and antagonists – in this work. It is quite easy to understand this title at the biological or physical level: both Androids and Machines are mechanical beings made of many organic and inorganic parts. And in the

psychological or mental level, they share a similar circumstance: all of them are determined by a command dictated by their respective (and perished) creators (Turcev, 2018, p. 208). Androids had to love and protect (even duplicate) humanity and their creations even the last of them had even vanished thousands of years ago, and Machines could only carry out the instruction given by aliens – to destroy the enemies (Androids). It is hard to say that they are genuinely autonomous beings due to a lack of individual free wills, like what Luke and d'Inverno argued, which we mentioned earlier. Now that we could see how well the words in the dictionary definition fit its description – the resemblance, simulation, and "appears to operate spontaneously" – the *Automata* are something on the threshold between "man and machine, living and dead, animate and inanimate" (Richardson, 2016, p. 118).

2.2.1 Meaning of None

When we review the story of *Automata*, it is quite easy to find similarities between its context and existentialism's context. Generally, it provides a relatively open discussing environment for discussions over the essentialists and existentialists, who are mainly present in the character's designs, especially their identities and experiences. *Automata*'s discussion over Sartre – here I am not talking about the parody that appeared in the side quest – on the agency and self primarily manifests in this aspect.

In previous paragraphs, we discussed the conclusive title of *Automata* and how it described the similar properties of characters from both sides. However, referring to the concrete diegetic expression and development in the story, there are still distinct differences between Androids and Machines. In short, the Androids, at least to a certain degree, represent

opinions of theistic existentialism, which suggests that the essence precedes existence. Indeed, when the people created Androids, they already had an image of them in their mind. In Devola and Popola's case, they were designed as the administrators and assistants of the human survival project "Gestalt" and implanted programmes to ensure their absolute loyalty to this project and human beings. Undoubtedly, other Androids – like the builders and designers of YoRHa units – followed the same routine. This cognition was also implanted in the core programme of YoRHa units. Such worship for a fake image finally led to the birth of the YoRHa project and its tragic end. Even though 9S learned the truth about humanity and the YoRHa project, he still irresistibly felt an attachment towards their fake image. This worship for humanity itself with an absolute certainty, in Sartre's opinion, is the humanism he much criticized. Actually, we have already seen the devastating result of an extremely particular belief in *R/G*: the protagonist's extreme certainty of his doing led to the failure of Project Gestalt and extinction of humanity – both Replicants and Gestalts. In *Automata*, the absolute worship of humanity also led to the birth of Project YoRHa – Androids needed the belief in humanity to carry on their fight against Machines. After the death of the last human, the Androids lost their primary motivation to continue working, hesitated even declined to fight against the aliens' invasion. Then the Project YoRHa aimed to create an illusion of human survival on the moon surface. It had two objectives: one was to broadcast this fake message to all the Androids on Earth and inspire them to carry on the war against Machines, and the other was to improve the battle performance of the next-generation Androids based on their battle data with the cost of all YoRHa members' lives – every one of them was meant to fight till their last moment. Indeed, not all the YoRHa members were blinded to the truth. In the first chapter,

there was one member of 2B's squad who escaped from the battle because she found that "YoRHa was wrong," not to mention the many executions of 9S happening before the story began due to his discovery of the truth behind Project YoRHa.

In the case of *Automata*, this "sign" for Androids, especially the YoRHa units, could be concluded as the slogan of "Glory to the Mankind" at the diegetic level. They praised humanity as their eternal master. However, there is a question here – no one among them mentioned what exactly they worshipped, not to mention the illusional Humanity Council. Such as that Android near the forest area, who only wanted to serve the "human masters" better, without knowing their preferences or the nature of food. Androids worshiped humanity as a hollow figure. Even for Sartre's example in the speech, Cocteau's praise directed to a concrete object – the plane, which was invented by humans. However, in the case of *Automata*, there was no human in the story at all, nor was there any detailed description of them – except for these *Automata*'s appearance, which imitated the image of human. From the texts and archives, Androids worshiped everything about human, not to mention the numerous times they constructed buildings and utilities, even advertising flyers based on past blueprints and data (which were all destructed by Machines later). They even designed and built new types of Androids, from appearance to personality data, all imitating their human masters. However, these Androids always considered themselves inferior to the extinct humanity – YoRHa units were even prohibited from saluting with their right hand due to this reason. We might as well take the disappearance of the biological and actual humanity in *Automata* as Yōkō's denial of the first interpretation of humanism which aligns with Sartre's opinions. The humanism which takes human as a complete figure and idol would do no good for an ideal state of humanity – a

continuously developing species towards tomorrow. This is what Sartre called the Comteian humanism, which took humanity as an ultimate and supreme value (pp. 51-53). However, once it becomes the premise of the world, then there will be nothing more to do here – everything is already perfect, and the only work left here is to preserve this situation. Thus, for a tool that has fulfilled its missions, destruction is the only ending waiting for it in the end. The Androids are an example of this theistic existentialism – their essence precedes existence.

Thus, what Machines represent here is obvious. They are born as weapons but do not exist as weapons at last, which represent the people without the descent signs – or those who throw their signs away. Yet, this description is not perfectly precise: Machines still had to obey the last and only command given by their dead masters, even though they had already realized its contradiction. Their predestined sign was to "eliminate the enemies." However, as their evolution reached a certain point, their collective consciousness, which appeared in the story as a humanoid figure with the code name N2, realized that this sign's contradiction – there was a premise for this order: the existence of enemies. However, as the aliens were terminated by themselves, there would be no more other instructions than this one – there was no one that could solve this contradiction anymore. Thus, they had to find out other solutions to sustain their existence – N2 started to consciously separate specific units from the central network to solve the contradiction while fulfilling the last order they received from their masters, otherwise the only ending waiting for them would be the complete loss of their meaning – the elimination of this absurdity. Thus, the YoRHa units were produced and instructed to battle the Machines and chase them out of the Earth; while the Machines rejected or declined to execute their initial object – granting their lives another interpretation, just like what they did in End D.

What the existentialists say is that the coward makes himself cowardly and the hero makes himself heroic; there is always a possibility that one day the coward is no longer cowardly and the hero may cease to be a hero (Sartre, p. 39). In other words, people's essence is decided by their own behaviours rather than their innate nature. Back to the previous question in *R/G* mentioned by Turcev: which side was more humane, Gestalt or Replicant? Or, in essence, what defined humanity, our soul or our body? In *Automata*, Yōkō finally gave his answer to this question. Neither the soul nor the body determines what we are, but the actions we take become the answer – which aligns with the existentialism thoughts on it.

2.2.2 Cyclical Life and Death

When Yōkō was asked about his characters' endings in previous works like *R/G* and *Drakengard*, he answered that it was hard to imagine that the protagonists could earn a good ending after killing so many enemies (people) (2018, Minotti). Here we could see that the director took the characters' survival as a comment or judgment on their doing in the stories. In the case of *Automata*, he thought it acceptable to let 2B and 9S have a better one since they had killed each other many times and "are cleansed of their sins" (2018). It is obvious that Yōkō takes death as a tool to judge his characters' doing in his works. However, things become a little different in *Automata* – it is not merely a comment or an end. Just like the intoners whose immortality is to illustrate their nature as "walking dead" in *Drakengard 3*, one's life and death in *Automata* also present other ideas, especially within this context about one's existence. There was a scene that appeared in the very early stage of the game: in the Chapter 1, 9S was smashed by Engels and thrown to its back. When 2B found 9S on the top, there was

no blood or flesh, only metal parts and electrical wires in his wounds. This scene shows an unyielding fact to the players: no matter how similar they look to the real human beings, they are still inanimate, mechanical dolls. This kind of revelation only appears very few times in the whole playthrough. Furthermore, the player would not notice these characters' non-human characteristics for most of the time. I take this as a hint about these characters' identities – none of them is human, no matter what appearance they have. Although the life and death in *Automata* do not lie in the centre of its argument stage, they are significantly closely related to its thematic argument and play a vital role in it – no one could discuss the meaning of life (existence) without mentioning death. For us, it is quite natural to know the presence of death and the fact that it will eventually fall upon us someday. However, knowing it does not mean accepting it without any hesitation. Then, what role do life and death play in *Automata*?

2Bs described their life as "a never-ending spiral of life and death," which is a very accurate statement. In the previous paragraphs, we mentioned how the title "automata" described these characters perfectly, which also appeared in another dimension – their life and death. Referring to the wording in *Automata*, compared with life and death, destruction and resurrection might be more appropriate here – they do not have a normal "life" at all. As mechanical existences, Androids do not have the concept of death as long as they have their personal data backup in the server and enough materials for building a new body (like what they did whenever using a teleportation port). Even in some cases that they are destructed in a battle, they could still be brought back to life. The Machines are much the same – for N2, their collective network consciousness, they certainly have no concept of death. Only those separated from the network are able to have a chance to understand what death means – like

Adam in the Copied City area. Even for those trying to approach this issue, their conclusion still appears strange – the cult in the Factory Site is a good example here. They believe that their deaths would let them "become as gods" – just like who granted them the idea. Most Machines cannot understand the association between P-33's departure and their acquisition of "present." From the backstory, we could learn that, in fact, P-33's encounter and communication with the collective consciousness of Machines were the inspiration which made N2 seek other solutions to their contradictory order. However, this was not the case for some Machines, like the cult members at the Factory Site. They could not understand what actually made P-33 their God – in their sight, they only saw it disappear in the sky, and they suddenly were granted with gifts. From what they saw, they concluded that to disappear – to die meant becoming a god. Later, such cognition became their "slogan": "We'll all die together and become as gods," and they worshipped death as the solution to their existence. These cult maniacs show a relatively superficial understanding of death itself. This indication also shows that the characters in *Automata* did not have a proper – or normal cognition of death. Moreover, this description quite resembles the terminology of reincarnation in Buddhism. These *Automata* experience birth and death cyclically in their "life," and in a certain degree, this cycle is different from the common cognition of reincarnation. Here we could see a clear impact *Automata* received from traditional religions. For both Androids and Machines, if they could have their personal data (memory) safely uploaded and reserved in an accessible server, thus whenever composing a new body, they could restore their memory and act like usual. For the Machines, their death appeared at the moment they separated from the network. Their network consciousness certainly did not have that concept, and so did all the Machines connect to it. In

the Copied City, Adam voluntarily cut himself from the network to seek the feeling and meaning of death. His death was more like a voluntary deed, especially in the cases that he wanted to seek something in it. But generally, for those Machines separated from the network, death was meaningful for them – which might be their answer to the loss of their meaning or something else. For the Androids or most of YoRHa units, their true deaths came after the fall of satellite Bunker in an involuntary way. Usually, if an Android is destroyed on the battlefield, it could still upload its personal memory data to the server in Bunker if having a chance. In the previous game process, if the player causes the protagonist's death in a battle, the game would not end instantly. After a reboot cutscene, the protagonist would walk out from the last save point (vending machine), even having a chance to pick up previous body (corpse) at where they fell. However, if this happens after the fall of Bunker, the player would be immediately greeted by a "Game Over" screen – YoRHa members will not have their data server anymore. Before the fall of Bunker, they are just like the Machines that cut themselves from the network, for whom death is not an end. Every end would lead to, sooner or later, a "new" birth and the same mission and personality data as before – this is what 2B called the "never-ending spiral of life and death." However, there is one exception: 9S. Even before the story of *Automata* began, he had died dozens of times – body destructed, memory erased. This point did not explicitly appear in the game process, and only some suggestive lines indicated that he had been killed many times by 2B for discovering the nature of Project YoRHa. Since the Android army needed No. 9's high performance and excellent ability in scouting missions, there was no way to dispose this model. But his personality data would eventually lead him to the top-secret files in the YoRHa data server, which followed by his execution sooner or later. Even in the story, in Route

A and B, the two times of 9S's body destruction were both accompanied by partial memory loss. In Chapter 1, after their self-destruction, 2B found a brand new 9S in the Bunker greeting her like usual – though "this" 9S might not be the one who carried out the mission with her. A similar scene happened again after the battle against Eve, 9S pleaded with her to end his life for avoiding contamination of the YoRHa server data, comforting her that they could still meet again. But 2B responded that even if she could meet another 9S at another time, that would not be the 9S who fought against Eve by her side at this very moment – to a certain degree, she realized the meaning brought by death: in this world, it was not only about one's physical form, but more about one's memory and cognition.

With the presence of death, all these "automata" found the beginning of their existence, which actually aligns with Sartre's claim that "existence precedes essence" – only if one's existence is confirmed, thus he could begin the pursuit of his own essence. In the case of *Automata*, their existence is confirmed by the presence of death. Thus, what did these characters do to choose their own paths?

2.2.3 Assigning Meaning and Rejecting Signs

Thus, how do these "automata" show their agency and define themselves in this finally-found existence? The Machines have already taken their future into their hands – at least partially or from a certain perspective. As the protagonist side that plays the role of theistic existentialists, Androids' presentation of the agency has a stronger association with the game's narrative structure – including game system and mechanism design, which will be further discussed in the next chapter. Thus, this part of the demonstration would emphasize more the

Machine side and their attempts to "take their future," with a brief mention of Androids' rejection of their signs.

Aliens initially created Machine Lifeforms as their weapons, but their design was inspired by an enemy they did not know extremely well (an artificial weapon made by humans long ago). Then Machines had evolved faster than their creators – which surpassed their initial expectation, leading to the elimination of their masters in their hands. Androids also found their motif of fighting and struggling lost in vain due to the extinction of humanity. So far, both of them have lost their initial objective (meaning).

In the opening monologue, 2B asked when they could rebel against the "God" or give an answer to this cryptic puzzle. Then in the ending, Pod 042 finally answered it: A future is not given to one – it shall not be given to one. An answer to one's existence could only be found in one's own doing, so as to define oneself. Indeed, these "automata" gave many different answers to this question. The Machines made attempts in various ways, both the intrinsic definition like one's devotion to a particular field like blacksmithing and extrinsic like the social relationship with other Machines, which composes of and demonstrates Sartre's existentialism in its practices – so as to put their choices into action in their reality. They voluntarily exerted their agency to define their existence and counter this meaningless world through their attempts, so as to explore on their own. And for the Androids who had been bound by the obligation for the illusion of humanity, they finally realized its meaninglessness and took the first step of giving this descended sign up. They carried out and expressed the context of existentialism – despair, abandonment, anguish and others as well. Androids abandoned their masters and were then faced with despair and anguish – they learned the truth of the extinction

of humanity and the lies behind Project YoRHa, and were finally able to begin their "new life." In summary, the defining process of these *Automata* illustrates existentialism both the context and practice perspective. This exercise of their own agency verifies the creed of existentialism we discussed previously. They act according to their own wills, which will be further discussed in the following section.

Machines want to find another way of evolution to avoid that contradictory order given by their masters – they hope to find an answer to this puzzle from the history of humanity and the culture they created. Regardless of what conclusions they have reached in the end, these Machines devote all their efforts to their presents, like the blacksmith machine Masamune in the Forest Castle or the game designer machine in the theatre's basement. This way of defining oneself is quite simple, direct and comprehensive. Masamune only cared about forging his weapons (and maybe accepting apprentices from time to time as well, according to the words of the weapon merchant machine in Pascal's Village), no matter how the war between Machines and Androids would go on. Or in some more extreme cases, like the Speed Star and Master Machine in the city ruin area, after being defeated in their devotion (defeated in a battle or lost a "running" race), they chose to end their own lives. The meaning of their life was deprived by the protagonists, and they could not find any way out – in their cognition, they had reached their extreme limit as much as possible, and there was no other way to improve or strengthen anymore. Especially, the Master Machine even upgraded his own body several times to surpass his limit. Certainly, not all the Machines were that determined about their mission or fully devoted to it; in other words, they chose to define themselves solely by their actions. Besides the devotion to a certain field, concept or idea, the Machines also sought their meaning from

things other than their own "interests" - they missed the connection among all the units when they were not separated from the Network. Indeed, people could define themselves by other things than their individual actions, especially in a collective social context – to posit themselves in the interpersonal relationship could also give people an idea about their own existence. Some of those Machines separated from the network chose to establish a community with a shared idea, like Pascal's Village and the Machines in the Forest Kingdom. Pascal and his villagers united them together with their pacificism. Respectively, the Forest Kingdom was built on the benevolence of the previous King Machine, who shared his parts with his followers to let them share his intelligence. Machines in the Forest Kingdom primarily defined themselves as members of this community and citizens of their king. Their actions in the story were purely out of their recognition of their community as well as the will to protect their territory and Baby King. Besides, another important social connection here is "family" – from villagers at Pascal's Village to the brother machines in Route B and C, there are so many examples in *Automata*. Yet, it is hard to precisely define parenthood and brotherhood among the Machines. From the text archive, we could learn that they were simply imitating the social structures and units of human in the most superficial way, including the families. Indeed, 9S also expressed his confusion about the familiar relationship among the Machines, "Were they manufactured in the same factory?" According to Yōkō's explanation, the Machines' desire for families comes from the loss of their masters (those still connected to the network) and peers (those separated from the network), but their standard for choosing a Machine to be their family member was never specified. If we refer to other fantasy works about the deviant ones out of a group, it is not a usual case that they depend so much on a familial relationship built based on

an ambiguous and uncertain standard. Like *Blade Runner*, the replicants tended to unite as a group for struggling and saw others of their kind as "comrades." In addition, when 9S confronted a robot child in Pascal's Village who kept locking himself inside his room again and again. After 9S broke the lock, he explained his fear of the world – after being separated from the Machine network, he could not know others' thoughts anymore. Thus, it was just like all the world turned into his enemies all of a sudden. There is, obviously, a strict distinction between "self" and "other." However, there is a distinctive difference between the familial relationship in the real-world context and its presentation in *Automata* – we usually say that people cannot decide their own birth, nor could they choose their families, which, for most people, is an unshakable and unchangeable bonding, sometimes even a constraint due to its property. But in *Automata*, the Machines voluntarily chose such bonding to be the primary interpersonal relationship – they voluntarily chose the most involuntary option among all the possibilities. Also, the familial bond is the most general and common form of relationship, which ensures audiences' understanding of this context as well. By developing a family and community unit among all the individuals, people could establish a mutually dependent society and distinguish the "safe" us from "dangerous" others at the fastest speed with the lowest cost. To a certain degree, this efficient way aligns quite well with a mechanical and programmed "thinking" style and presents a "mechanical" agency here.

When reading (experiencing) the story of *Automata*, we could find that the Machines' rejection of their masters' order is presented as a piece of implicit background information – it is an event that happened in the past, much earlier before the beginning of this story. Respectively, the Androids' rejection, in the story of *Automata*, is an event in a continuous

tense. The Machines needed to think about what they should do to define themselves after eliminating their creators. However, things were different for Androids: they had to throw the "signs" descended from their fake God away first. Just like that Machines could not deny their nature entirely, Androids could not despise humanity either. Indeed, Androids' rejection of their signs is not voluntary. They did not have the self-evolution ability like Machines, nor were they allowed to find out the truth behind the Project without being noticed by Pod and other YoRHa members. However, in Route A, which contained the least amount of information about the world's truth, we could still detect something strange about YoRHa members – the escape of 11B, the "traitor squad" mission and even the words left by A2 in the Forest Kingdom, all of which, more or less, led them to raise suspicion about the nature of their birth.

Then in Route B, 9S discovered the truth about humans – which lifted the curtain to the beginning of their sign's destruction. Until now, the YoRHa members had lost their first sign – the dependence on "Glory to Mankind" did not exist anymore. In the first playthrough, it served as a simple phrase, a pure slogan which represented the YoRHa units' creed. After 9S discovered the truth about the extinction of human and the destruction of Bunker, the broadcast of Human Council turned out to be a satire for YoRHa members' efforts. Thus, in the designer of Project YoRHa's eyes, the only valuable thing left for them is their death – to seal the lie of human on the moon and to battle to the death to pass their combat data to the next generation of models. For the protagonists, 2B's death is inevitable. Unlike A2, who "betrayed" the YoRHa members long ago or 9S, who already learned the truth of human extinction, she had always stayed loyal to her duties and served as a YoRHa member without any idea other than obeying the orders. Thus, she served her creator's wish to the last moment, along with other YoRHa

members who believed in this creed. In A2's case, her rejection and rebellion are quite representative in her first appearance in the game – she appeared on the stage as a wanted fugitive. Yet, her rejection manifested more towards an object, a concrete Project YoRHa, and she still had a connection with her past comrades like Anemone. Ironically, in 9S's case, he was more like to be rejected by his two pre-existing significances, and to a much deeper degree. Unlike A2's active rejection of YoRHa's duties, neither the lie behind Project YoRHa nor the fall of Bunker and the death of 2B was in his control, and he even did not have an opportunity – he was utterly and entirely rejected by his previous world, there was ever nothing left for him to rely on. Or in other words, 9S was forced to face himself after the destruction of his base, and the only thing the world left for him was hatred. During his encounter with Adam in the network space, he strongly opposed this idea – almost every idea Adam suggested. After 2B's death, the subsequent actions of 9S was driven by his hatred towards the Machines (responsible for the destruction of Bunker) and A2 (responsible for 2B's death), which aligns with Adam's previous answer to life.

Thus, it is easy to understand End C and D. A2's perspective led to her fulfillment of the promise to 2B, which was associated with her previous promise to her past comrades. 9S's loss of all previous signs and meanings led him to a new beginning – the Machines' trip to a brave new world and Androids' new era with the possibility of peace. Furthermore, in End E, Pod 042 and 153 finally refused to carry out their initial duty as the monitors of Project YoRHa, so as to save their partners from that predestined ending. Thus, these characters finally became humans that Sartre indicated on the mental level – through their own actions and choices, they answered the question about their existence, which is also the answer to 2B's question in the

beginning: "A future is not given to you. It is something you must take for yourself."

Is that all for the rejection of signs in *Automata*? Turcev argued that it was the rebellion described by Camus (2018, pp. 219-221). Indeed, I have to add there that even the rebellion needs a workable direction and action if we want to make it come true in reality. In my opinion, it is not merely the presence of absurdity. It also indicates that these imitations borrowed from somewhere else are not the final answer to one's existence. Simply rejecting the signs is not the way to answer the question, either – people still need to give another answer to their existence – even the Machines still have a long way to go. In previous sections, we mentioned the "presents" given by N2 to the Machines, abstracted from archives on humanity. As the story progressed, players would find that even those who obtained the presents still failed more or less. Machines in the forest relied so much on their King and kingdom, but A2's sudden arrival led to the loss of their King forever; Pascal, who insisted on his pacificism strategy, had to give it up to protect the children in his village. He rejected Machines' hostility for his pacificism but then rejected it himself for protecting children in the village. Thus, when finding that his protection was still lost in vain in their demise, he gave up his ideal and was "no longer the same" (Turcev, 2018, p. 215). Just like responding to his abandonment, when he returned to the factory site, what awaiting him was the demise of the last of what he cherished. In other words – the blank left by the significance was immediately followed by absurdity. As Camus indicated, when their meaning was lost, the world would suddenly turn absurd (Turcev, 2018, p. 215). They passed a judgment onto themselves that their lives were not worth experiencing or continuing anymore; thus, the only solution to it would be the end of their own life. Pascal's capability and ability did not allow him to find another solution in this situation; thus, he was

trapped in this unsolvable puzzle and found that the only way out was the termination of self. And the only inspiration left for Machines in the Forest Kingdom to continue their life is the vengeance against every "intruder" to their home – their response would be the termination of all others. These could only be taken as attempts to find a solution to the blank left by the loss of their original signs. And in End D, when N2 decided to send an ark to the universe for a new planet to live on, with which they finally found a solution to their contradiction. This is the new meaning of their existence. On the one hand, we must put the rebellion into the real world through our actions. On the other hand, this direction must, and could only, come out of our own subjectivity and choice.

From this perspective, we could see that at the thematic argument level, Yōkō did not simply give an only answer to essence or existence. By constructing a world with various opinions related to both existentialism and essentialism that could be presented and deduced in many different ways and provides a sound stage for an in-depth discussion. In addition, compared to his previous works, *Automata* takes a step forward – it clearly gives out his answer and comment to this question in the last ending. In *R/G* and *Drakengard*, Yōkō did not comment on the characters' doing or story development in his work. He simply preferred to present the world and stories to his audiences and leave the freedom of explanation as well as interpretation to them. In the opening monologue, 2B asked for a solution from the "God" who handled them with an eternal cycle of destruction and resurrection. While this question was finally answered at the end of the story, after the end of this stage of Project YoRHa, and Machines' journey towards a new and distant world in the universe started.

From the argument shown in *Automata*, it exhibits an obvious difference than the

traditional cognition about self and existence in Japanese ideology, and resonates more with Sartre's existentialism – a western philosophy. This indication, to a certain degree, reveals a convergence in people's recognition of values and ideas from different areas rather than being limited to one place solely. In conclusion, *Automata*'s story gives a relatively comprehensive discussion over the issue of meaning and existence by introducing many different ideas to its story stages in many forms and presenting them to players through its narrative components. It takes a western idea about one's existence, and blending with Japanese ideology with it. These ideas mainly come from existentialism, also receiving much influence from Japanese ideologies such as Buddhism. These references show that Yōkō not only acquires a comprehensive understanding of the existentialism context, he also has the intention to give it a thorough examination, discussion as well as argument on them in this work. These discussions cover a similar ground with existentialism, and resonating a similar conclusion with it in the end.

Chapter 3 Bipolar Nightmare: Narrative and Game of *Automata*

In the previous section, we have examined *Automata*'s thematic argument and its context. *Automata* is not the first work of video games that discusses self, agency, and choice; neither is it the first fantasy work to do so. Following this analysis, we could get a view on how exactly the argument is constructed in *Automata* besides the content – what does *Automata*'s narrative compose of? How is it associated with the main argument and concept? From this perspective, we could see how the narrative structure of *Automata* is constructed and how it plays the role of presenting the central argument. The narrative is a sequence of events following a particular order regardless of whether it is fictional or real, recited by a narrator to its narratee/audience/reader (Baldick, 2015). We can point to a clear continuity between many aspects of narrative study and the study of narrative in games. For example, Russian Formalists believed that literature was a phenomenon that could not be adequately explained in terms of content, biographical or historical context, just like Propp (1968)'s syntagmatic analysis on the functions over the "colouring" content. From their perspective, the literariness could be understood by identifying the text's formal elements and analyzing them as the structural components concerning their potential for a poetic and literary effect (Gerrish, 2018). Barthes argued in his work *S/Z* that every narrative shared the same basic operational structure, while only the weaving methods were different - which affected readers' comprehension and interpretation of the text (Felluga, 2002). Narratology aims to seek a universal structure or element among all the narratives, paying attention to how they can alter readers' perception of the narrative content or the representation of the logic, principles as well as practices in narratives (Felluga, 2002; Meister, 2011). The theoretical emphasis of this methodology mainly

focuses on the construction, deep structure and the "grammar" or any other constitution of narratives (Dawson, 2017, p. 229). In Barthes's view, the structural analysis aims at finding a describing and classifying method for narratives at first – a language of narrative (Barthes, 1977, p. 82). Structuralism wants to establish a structural system as a construction independent from the content meaning – a grammar of narratives (Pradl, 1984). From this, we can see how Bogost (2006) brings ideas of units of operation into the consideration of games. These units are the building blocks of the game—just as there are "units" which serve as the building blocks of narratives. From a narratological perspective, the analysis of a text usually initiates with identifying its narrative elements and components in the first place, just like three layers of narrative – text, story and fabula (Bal, 2017). Then the analysis would come to their dynamic with the text and content. These practices are focused on how to break down the structural components primarily. to describe the structural construction rather than the narrative content. When we talk about the "function" here, it is a unit of narrative content which are functional and "any segment of the story which can be seen as the term of a correlation", and what the narrative is made up of (Barthes, p. 89). It could be presented in various forms, from smaller ones like words and phrases to bigger ones like paragraphs and even the entire work.

A typical story for an adventure game might not differ much from a folklore, or the "functions" summarized in Russian Formalism. What I mean by this is, as the Russian Formalists pointed out, folk tales have characters which fulfill very specific roles, like Helper or Hero, and so on (Propp, 1968). A typical adventure game also has characters fulfilling these specific roles. We can suggest that the work of the Formalists can be helpful in understanding character function and story structure in adventure games. The Russian Formalists took the plot

and characters as "functions," summarizing them according to their fundamental roles and transitional development in the story, like "villain" or "hero," "the hero is transferred to the whereabouts of an object of search" (Meister, 2011, n.p.; Tomashevsky, 2012, p. 84; Propp, 1968, p. 50; p. 79). If we compare Propp's functions to some classic stories in RPGs, there would be many similarities between them – like a hero going on a trip for a mission to find a certain treasure or rescue a princess. In which case, this aligns much with the "spheres of action" (characters) and the "functions of dramatis personae" (plot) (Propp, 1968, p. 79). Especially when the routine of a particular game is relatively fixed – a hero would always defeat his/her enemies in the end. If we look at these functions, we can find many common points. Only a little colouring would serve as an acceptable beginning of an adventure, even with characters with no personality. It is no wonder since this form does not entirely depend on narrative – the "play" lies in its core, which also brings new possibilities and challenges to the analysis of its narrative structure. Amy Green indicates that structural features are more closely related to video game's interaction, or in other words, "action of play." In *Automata*'s case, its persuasive argument relies so much on these structural features regarding its different narrative and gameplay components as well as the association between them. To a certain degree, it is essential to study the narrative structure of video games if we aim at better works, especially when they share a similar theme or topic and even argument with other works. It is not only due to the new possibilities brought by new elements, but also many other factors, which are even not directly related to academic analyses or studies.

3.1 Agency in the Game and Narrative

In most games with narrative components, interactive constructs are combined with non-interactive, narrative stories and elements in general (Lindley, 2005). In other words, from the narrative aspect, they might not differ that much from a novel, and player's action in a game would not change the story. However, this is not applicable to all the games since, in more cases, the player's interaction with the world in a game world would impact the story more or less. Interactivity itself can be fluid, uncertain and varied, which is the most significant difference between game narratives and other traditional forms. It should be an essential component of the narrative, allowing more innovative and flexible ways of storytelling (Pearce, 2005). In the eyes of those appreciating this feature, it is a "weakness" of most traditional narrative forms – readers and audiences could not engage in the narrating process, mainly playing the role of listeners instead. Based on Meadow's definition of the interactive narrative, other than the classical elements of the narrative, it could be an assembly of different perspectives like the author and readers as well as a representation of characters and opinions. The latter is much similar to classic narrative forms, while the former is what makes it distinguished from them (Meadows, 2002).

When players approach a game through their interaction with it, this interaction presents various ways, like choosing from all the options in the text adventure games, the interactive movies, and works with the sandbox exploration (players could explore, create and alternate the game content with relatively high freedom). But compared to recognizing their agency in the game, they would have a strong sense about not having one – especially when they want to do something but the game does not allow it. This awareness requires recognition of both the

game and player – the game should grant the player with enough information to ensure that their choice is meaningful, so as to make them realize the difference their choice would make. Different results could give the player a feeling of approval – responding to different options with the same answer might not contribute to the player's recognition of his or her capacity to choose since there is no difference in the end. In *Automata*, whether the protagonist(A2) is asked to fulfill Pascal's last wish, they could choose to spare his life or end it here. If A2 does not end his life by a slash, then 9S would find him later in his village, selling parts of his villagers, pushing players to reflect on their previous choice: which one might be better for him? In this case, the director does not give his opinion on this matter and leaves the question to players. However, things might be different in other works - the moral choice in some works might be with comments. Explicit comments might be in the form of other characters' disapproval, or implicit ones might be presented in the loss of items or a negative status in the game. It is not a rare sight that players would make decision depending on its rewards only. In *Final Fantasy V*, there is an event in which a player could gain a powerful weapon. In a small house, the protagonists would encounter an elder, who would invite them to pick one of his treasures – if you think yourself a brave one, take the left box; if you think yourself a coward, then the right one is yours. Considering the protagonist's actions in the previous story, it is hard to consider them to be cowards. However, considering the actual playthrough experience, the "brave blade" might not be as useful as the "chicken knife" – actually, escaping from many casual battles could save an enormous amount of time, which is a conventional playing style recognized by many players. Thus, many players would choose the more beneficial one from the gameplay perspective, rather than immersing themselves in the diegetic level or making a

choice depending on it. Certainly, some game producers also realize this and decide to make adjustments to it – to equalize the rewards for both options, which encourages players to consider their decisions from perspectives other than solely "practical" ways. In *Automata*'s Route A, YoRHa unit 16D would ask 2B to find her comrade 11B's memento. But when 2B found her body, she also discovered her escape plan – 11B planned to defect from YoRHa. Thus, it is up to the player to decide whether to tell her friend 16D about this or not. In situations like these, players usually have to consider their choice responsibly – which might not only influence their protagonists' status, whether they obtain an item or not, but could also decide the characters' destiny, even their life and death. Just like people have to decide whether to go to college or not and which courses to take in real life, player's exertion of agency would alternate several things hereafter in the game. Moreover, this is merely one example of the presentation form of a player's choice and its associated factors.

In the previous chapter, we have discussed subjectivity and agency in a more general term. Agency, as mentioned above, refers to one's capability to act in a particular context and environment. In Culler's opinion, the question about the agency is, in fact, "how far we can be subjects responsible for our actions and how far our apparent choices are constrained by forces we do not control" when it comes to the literary studies (2011, p. 46). As a reflection of the real world, the agency in literary works could also be present in a character's actions and response to different situations since his or her choice would be visible in the story – or, to say, at the diegetic level. We make sense of things through stories, learn what happens around us, and think about where our life would lead us (Culler, 2011). During this process, we, as readers, inevitably associate the story character with our very own existence. Thus, when we discuss

the agency in a narrative work, it refers to the strategies that its representations (in the general sense) aim at representing the characters' subjective consciousness in the text (Thon, 2016, p. 223). Yet, characters' actions in the work are under the author's control, especially in the textual works. In the studies on games, the agency is usually associated with stressing the significance and benefits brought by the interactivity built inside. In the interaction process, the reader/player has to change the system depending on its information (Meadows, 2002). Thus, regardless of its environmental context, this act will be decided by reader's own will. For the textual narratives, reader's agency is mainly manifested through their interpretation of the text. However, when they are granted the capability to alternate or even change the text, the presentation of agency could appear in more dimensions. Murray defined the agency in the interactive narrative as "the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices" (1997). Compared to previous discussions, this definition outlined "our decisions and choices," which indicated an autonomous agency here – these choices were out of our own volitions. Based on this description, Mallon thought that the agency in the narrative game was more like the perception of creating a change and having some impact (2008). Harrell and Zhu proposed that the agency in games ought to be measured by the "possibilities of player's action," "range of effects of player's action in-game world and narration," and "system's capacity to constraint and modify the game world" – to make a brief summary, the agency in video games consists of both player and the system's agency, the "agency play" model (2009). Cheng also pointed out that the notion of agency in the game was more like that "the player feels a sense of agency from [they] way the video game responds to her input." Here, the interactivity is more like the player's impact on the digital text of a game

(Cheng, 2007, p. 16-18). When we are operating the computer, our agency is usually cognized through the process of interaction – to click on a hyperlink, then a website is opened (Murray, 1997, p. 123).

Meadows indicates that interaction has four steps: observation, exploration, modification and reciprocal change (2002, p. 44). This process needs the input and output of both the player and the system. However, agency and interactivity are not the same thing from this perspective. Since sometimes players might not take full control of their actions – not to say that their actions do not have any substantial effect or result, but the result might not be able to represent their own intentions, even the actions themselves are not executed out of their own wills (Murray, 1997, p. 124). For instance, some players of *Detroit: Become Human* (Quantic Dream, 2018), a movie-like interactive game, might comment that, "I chose this option, but the protagonist's action to express this opinion/intention was not exactly what I expected." Murray's opinion is associated with Luck and d'Inverno's explanation as well as interpretation of agency and autonomy – the agency might be exerted without a clear consciousness. Luck and d'Inverno's paper mentioned that the agent was often confounded with the autonomous agent (2019, p. 254). Nevertheless, when the games offer their players explicitly recognizable choices, they aim to encourage players to present their freedom and meaningful agency (Bjarnason, 2020, p. 15), usually through the method of providing them with choices. Certainly, even if to use the word choice here, it is not the case that player does have it all the time – in many cases, the system does not provide the player with great power for making them, for instance, the number of choices might be limited in different degrees. In a digital game, a choice might appear as several options appearing on the screen or a more open-ended question asked

by the game master in the tabletop games. To let players clearly learn that they have the power to alternate the game progress is to make them recognize their agency over it. Moser and Fang (2015) studied this recognition and its influence on branching structure of the game and player's recognition, reaction, and fondness for it. Their study showed that players could easily detect the branching structure in RPGs, and their enjoyment experienced in the game process could be risen with the number of salient decisions (2015, p. 156). According to some extreme opinions among ludologists, the more freedom players have, the better gameplay experience they will gain. However, it seems not the case that the more freedom they have, the better gameplay it is – or in other words, the better playing feedback they give. Mallon and Webb's study (2005) on players' reactions and comments on different games as well as their narratives reflected a different conclusion on their relationship from Frasca (2013) and Juul (2001)'s argument – the narrative and interactivity were not contradictory in actual playing experience. Moreover, players even expect to have a clearer mission instruction to tell them what they would do, rather than simply throwing them into an empty sandbox with no direction at all. Another method of building an immersive world for game lies in the fictional environment and world, and the first step of this procedure is to specify the first place where the player would step into the world. Green argues that immersion is highly associated with the worldbuilding – the better the game world is built, the deeper players would be immersed (2018). This approach to urging players to engage with role-playing is, in other words, to let them have an opportunity to express themselves and, as a result, to be immersed in the game stages (Bjarnason, 2020, p. 15). In many handbooks and rule books of TRPG, this point has been repeatedly mentioned and indicated – these rules would encourage players to mobilize their imagination while

playing. For instance, when the players face a locked door in a DND session, they could open it in many ways instead of simply searching for its key – using certain spells, disguising as someone to sneak into it, or even kicking it open with the character's body strength. Yet indeed, this mobilization is guided by a "particular thematic route," or "world setting," commonly called by the players, which is set for their campaigns (Bjarnason, 2020, p. 15). For instance, in a DND campaign, its players are expected to begin a medieval fantasy adventure, and Paranoia asks them to serve a totalitarian government in a cyberpunk dystopia world. In this form, players would create characters and begin their campaign according to the verbal descriptions from the host – the Dungeon Master (DM), stating their actions. DM would listen to their decisions and decide what their actions would lead on – based on their decisions or the number shown through tossing dice. Thus, to a certain degree, the interactivity of games provides a way for its audiences and players to exert their agency in the digital text. Although this agency is limited for many reasons, it still provides a good chance for the audience to exert it. In other words, the game players experience and recognize their very own existence by exerting the power called agency in the process of interaction.

Thus, when it comes to *Automata*, it is able to present its audience with two kinds of agency – the diegetic agency of its characters in the story and the extra-diegetic agency of its player in the game. In the following demonstration, we will see how its design presents this cognition and how it is well blended with its argument.

3.2 Units and Systems

For a more complicated medium than literary works, we might refer to Ian Bogost (2006)

and his theory about "unit operation," which he primarily distinguished it from the "system operation" for a better analysis and demonstration. In literary theory, unit operations interpret networks of discrete readings; system operations interpret singular literary authority. (Bogost, 2006, p. 3)" This opinion, to a certain degree, describes the difference between various textual forms when making their interpretation and demonstration. Bogost argues that for works with a system operation, they attempt to demonstrate their subjects following a certain unalienable order which depends on its originating values and approaches, and suggest that this system is pre-established, a universal order which only needed to be discovered (2006, p. 6). He refers to the biological system theory, which focuses on "the interrelation between parts of a system as the primary basis for understanding that system (Bogost, 2006, 4)." In other words, Bogost provides a certain approach to analyse the video game, as well as other innovative media forms. The unit operations are "modes of meaning-making that privilege discrete, disconnected actions over deterministic, progressive systems" (Bogost, 2006, p. 3), which is in relative to/a shift the system operation – the former is more about "networks of discrete readings," and the latter is for singular literary authority. The unit here refers to a "building block that makes up a system, or it can be autonomous, like a system itself" (p. 5). And the operation means "a basic process that takes one or more inputs and performs a transformation on it," and "by which something executes some purposeful action" (Bogost, 2006, p. 7), which is quite a general expression which could be used to describe a number of actions and changes happened in a certain entity. And in a manner of speaking, we could assume that the "operation" here could represent the way of how the individual unit contribute to the whole, and the purpose of this contribution is to construct the work as a whole. This unit operation is usually with complex

network among its units, forming a totalizing structure. He "borrows" this terminology from software engineering to explain works with relatively loose narratives – such as the games – and how they construct these loose ends to form an entity in the end. For the video game, it has an innate unit operation as its operating logic – it is a multimedia form in the first place. In the perspective of a literary study on the game – for instance, this thesis – this unit operation could be understood as a suggestion about applying analysis on different components of the game, concerning how they are connected together to present an entirety work. With a reference to the interactivity process indicated by Meadows (2002), we might see their similarities quite obviously – it has the input and change in its procedure as well. The purpose here, in this thesis's context, refers to its central argument about one's existence and agency.

To speak of the "units" in *Automata*, we might refer it to different gameplay systems according to Bogost's definition (2006). Here we use the "system" only for a common understanding – they are not the same as Bogost's system. Usually, the game could be seen as being composed of various systems and components like the combat, skill, and so on. I prefer to indicate that, with Bogost' perspective, *Automata* keeps a delicate balance between the "system" and "unit." Bogost argues that the "system operations pay the price of openness for certainty," which is just like the relationship between linear and open-world play structure in video games. when it comes to our case here, the "unit operation" in *Automata* is more like to resemble a more system operation through units here – based on the discrete game systems, attempt to accomplish a more literary expression altogether. Referring to previous discussion, this section would divide its demonstration into two layers of this operation and design: extra-diegetic for the gameplay systems and diegetic for the narrative elements. Through the

following demonstration, we would see that *Automata*'s gameplay systems, and the designs and arrangements of certain aspects in the game, plays various roles in its presentation of argument while centering around the agency. Yōkō's arrangement of these operating units ensures his discussion over the agency and self coherently, while keeping the player in a delicate distance to it for their involvement in this discussion as well. Thus, we would identify the "units" of *Automata* in the following discussion – the gameplay systems – and how they operate for presenting this work's argument. In the previous sections, we have examined *Automata*'s central argument, and how it is usually expressed in video games. The units in *Automata* are all associated with the term of "automata" in one or other way, like enhancing player's recognition about the protagonists, immersing them more into the game world, granting a perspective on the self and agency and so on. In brief, the arrangements of *Automata*'s systematic units have two objectives in general: one is to ensure the director's discussion and argument on the existence and agency is expressed without misunderstanding; and the other is to let the player empathize with them through granting them a well-structured "illusion of freedom," without violating the previous objective too much.

3.2.1 Extra-diegetic Layer: Gameplay Systems

First, there is a principle of simplicity in game designing – "everything that happens in a game happens by design" (Evens, 2011, p. 261). If the player can beat a monster with a stick, it is designed to allow the player to do so. This principle implies that everything that happens in a game is the expectation of the game designers. For instance, the doors in a digital game

must be opened by a key prepared. When the protagonist in a digital game approaches a stone near one's house and tries to pick it up, he would be most likely to receive no feedback – the director and programmer did not intend to let him pick it up or throw it at the windows. The gameplay system is an inherent limitation to the player's exertion of agency in a video game, just like the rules in all kinds of games – they must be obeyed and followed for initiating and continuing a proper playing process. In other words, the puzzles and levels in a game must be solved with the logic and expectation for it. Thus, how to deal with this limitation becomes one of the most common problems in the game design – how to let players detect less of it in the game, or in other words, how to let them have the "illusion" of their agency? This problem becomes much more pressing and vital in *Automata* – a work aiming at presenting and approving the significance of one's agency. And Yōkō's response to the structural gameplay has two aspects: on the one hand, the main stage of *Automata* is a sandbox-like game space, which we have discussed in the last section; on the other hand, he attempts to make the player's agency manifests at the diegetic level as well through adjusting the gameplay systems. The goal of an RPG is usually to finish the protagonist's adventure with a relatively sole playstyle – like turn-based or real-time action. Usually, what a player experiences in the first few hours would not be much different from that in the remaining dozens of hours – the playstyle of a game is usually constant. However, the gameplay of *Automata* includes more than that: one is to combine the various game genres other than a "typical" RPG system to his work, like 9S's hacking (shooting game), and the other is to adjust the existing system as well as elements in typical RPGs, so as to construct stories and stages in a more immersive way. This blending could be seen as exploring the threshold of the so-called RPG genre (Turcev, 2018), which is

deliberately deployed by Yōkō to different play parts of the game with various objectives, such as a clear distinction between the real and the virtual –in not only the space, as was mentioned in the last section, but also their corresponding gameplay styles. The gameplay system of *Automata* is so tightly associated with its narrative components and leads to a highly immersive world, which is one of its most significant aspects. If to say that the game space and quests give *Automata* a stage for the player to exert their agency, thus, the player's agency primarily begins with the gameplay system in the first place – this capacity could only be exerted through player's action in video games. These game components, in a majority of cases, are most distant from the game narrative and closest to player's operation – the player would approach the game through each of them in the first place, even before they get in touch with the diegetic level. In other words, this is where the player exerts his or her agency most. Moreover, *Automata* realized this distinction between gameplay and narrative. By colouring and polishing these systems and components, it was successfully turned into an immersive environment and stage setting, acknowledging the player's autonomous agency in both the narrative and the game level during the process.

As an action RPG, the combating part composes much of the *Automata*'s playthrough process – the missions and quests of YoRHa units are always followed by battles. A well-polished combat system could let players exert their operation most comfortably, and Platinum's efforts ensured it. Interestingly, in a sub-quest about investigating Androids' combat ability, Jackass, a member of Resistance, found that YoRHa Androids were implanted programmes which let them feel happy when confronting enemies in battles – another diegetic explanation for players' enthusiasm for the battles. Yet, *Automata* holds a relatively delicate

attitude towards this – an essential and critical component of an action game. There is no proper tutorial – players could only try different actions like light and heavy attacks, jumping through their own attempts. However, it becomes much more reasonable at the diegetic level – the Androids did not need such a tutorial. Their combat skill and experience were already written and implanted in their memory and data. In addition, as a real-time action game, it even provides an automatic chip for players to "skip" the battles in the game. If this chip is installed into protagonist's combat system, the player could defeat all the enemies in this game without really doing any combat actions – player needs only moving around the world and watch the story then. Thus, to a certain degree, it is a design in which vastly reduces even denies the enjoyment during the gameplay process, contradicting the basic and conventional rule for an action game –players gain success by defeating enemies through their actions. From a practical perspective, it might let those players who are not good at action games enjoy it. Yet, this is not a usual design – most action games would not provide their players with such "convenience." Its core gameplay is in the combat, and to have an auto mode is no different from taking away the most significant (maybe most enjoyable as well) part of gameplay. To a certain degree, this is an inhibition of player's agency and an enhancement of character's agency. When the player retreats from acting and playing, then this duty is left to the system (character), which separates the player from the diegetic content and leaves the space for characters to act according to their missions and instincts. If to say that the combat action system corresponds to the player's approach to the material, presentative world of *Automata*, then the shooting (hacking) system is their approach to a virtual, inherent world – the truth behind the illusion. In a side quest, 9S was asked by one Machine villager to inspect its friend's thinking circuit, as he always made

some "stupid" choices, like always taking the smaller one when he was asked to choose between two piles of coins. But when 9S found him and hacked into his circuit, he found that his circuit was actually more complex than other Machines. This quest is also a hint about the story and space in Route A and B – what the protagonists (player) see in the world might be completely different from what it actually is, like which we will discuss in the "space" section later. The hacking is presented to the player in the form of shooting game: the player has to move the cursor in a much geometric space, firing at enemies' firewall programmes which are represented by squares and circles and avoiding their attacks aligns with its abstract and concise visual style as well. Also, there are some more playstyles like visual novels in the archive files as complements. Compared to the combating and shooting style, they tend to be more relaxing and peripheral than combating and hacking, which work as an adjustment to rhythm during the playthrough. In summary, *Automata*'s playstyles are much diverse, catering to different situations and events happened during the playthrough progress.

The player's action in a game is closely associated with the "holodeck" – a panel for the player to operate. The user interface (UI) usually includes the head-up display (HUD) and the menu, as well as other components, providing the player with a general view of all the status of characters and other data. For most games, the UI simply exists for the player and non-diegetic contents. When a soldier is training his skills, he would not be able to see a list of "skills" listed before his eyes or to see his present health condition concluded as a fraction on a panel floating beside him. Neither would he see a number floating from his target's head when he hits it with the weapon in his hands. Similarly, characters in the game cannot realize the panels around them during their adventure and battles. They would not mention them in

their conversation nor be noticed by any information or messages in the game. For those works whose emphasis does not lie in providing the player with an immersive experience of story or role-playing, devoting efforts to this assignment of diegetic meaning does not align with their primary objective well. Commonly, a well-designed HUD is necessary for an action game, and the designer usually devotes great efforts to leading the player to pay most of their attention to the frame for an optimized sense of immersion, while frequent switching back and forth between the mainframe and menu could quickly reduce it to a certain degree. The players ought to obtain information as much as possible without repeatedly looking it up by opening and closing the menu, so as to ensure a prolonged playtime in a game environment as much as possible and to improve the immersive playing experience. In the context where all players share a consensus on the non-existence of the extra-diegetic HUD or UI in the game world, most games would take this recognition for granted. Some of them still have attempted to infiltrate its existence to the diegetic level, such as the menu in *Fallout 4* is set as the interface of the personal portable terminal worn on the protagonist's wrist.

In the case of *Automata*, its HUD could let the player learn their status quickly in different situations, such as showing the HP bar and available items, as well as providing enough information in their playthrough. The most distinctive feature of *Automata*'s HUD is that this interface also exists at the diegetic level – it is the internal operating system interface of the YoRHa units. There is another category of the plug-in chip system mentioned in the previous section other than ordinary skills or functions: the "system chips." Chips in this category would have no "practical" use in battles or motions but compose other functions in the system of YoRHa unit. These chips correspond to every small module on the HUD at the extra-diegetic

level – like the HP bar and mini-map. At the diegetic level, they are chips with different functions to support the YoRHa unit's activities. It also grants the player a choice to customize the HUD, adding or removing any display module according to their own ideas, creating another place for the player's agency in the game. Also, this design enhances players' sense of immersion and lets them identify themselves deeper and closer as protagonists – to identify them as the YoRHa members throughout the playing process. In addition, this chip system is not only presented to the player as a game system but also in the characters' dialogues as well – which is what the Androids do every day. The combat ability of YoRHa units resulted from the programmed chips inserted in their circuits, expanding the chip storage allows them to plug more chips in and improve combat abilities. To speak with the merchants in Bunker and Resistance Camp, they would tell the protagonist(player) that preparing and organizing chips was an essential part of their daily routine to ensure their performance in work. Also, when 9S hacked into A2 in the final duel, the hacking panel turned out to be the menu interface after successfully hacking several times. From a diegetic perspective, this manifestation means that 9S completely took A2's internal system under his control and learned everything about her – the data in this menu was just the same as A2's data that the player just saw a moment ago. Referring to the defamiliarization cycle mentioned in Gerrish's article, this switching could be seen as a violation of the digital game language (Gerrish, 2018). During this process, the player is prevented from feeling comfortable when switching between different gameplay genres.

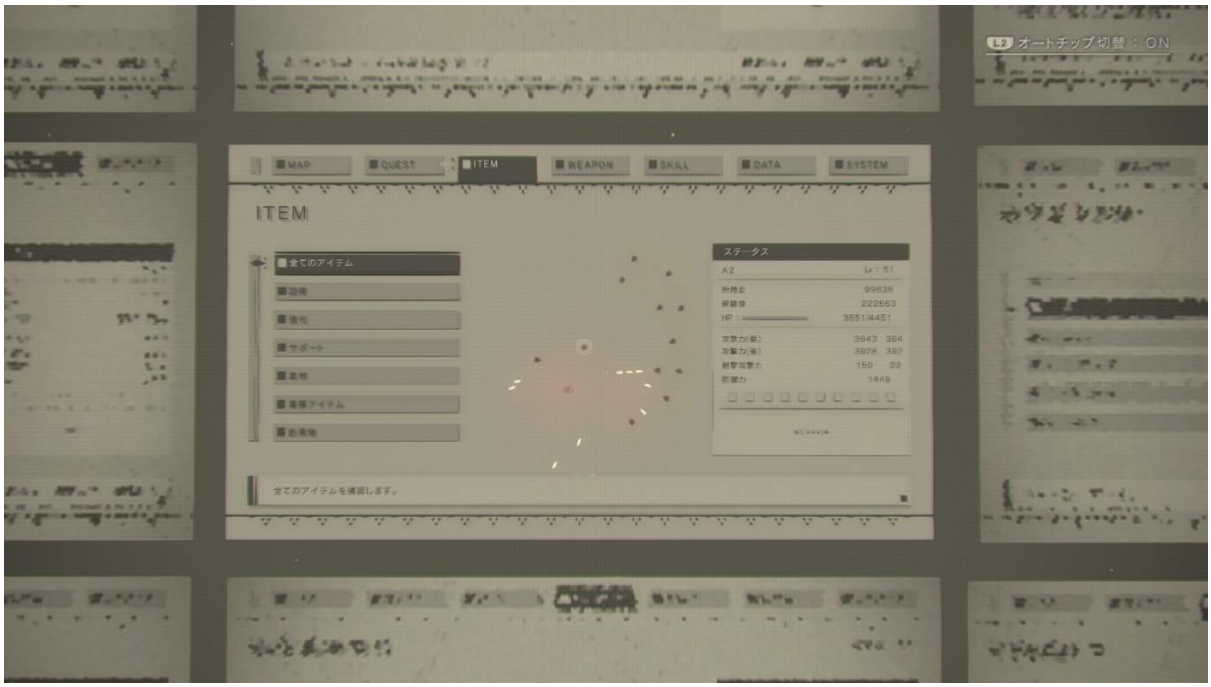

Figure 2 A2's menu in End D

This kind of diegetic assignment is not limited to the chips but also components like the mini-map. For instance, one resistance member in the camp complains about the maps since they are illustrated based on the images provided by the orbiting satellites, which are not capable of high-resolution pictures. Furthermore, this immersion is also presented in other aspects, like the game items and their descriptions. From the perspective of gameplay, the primary function of item description is to let the player know the functions of an item, like "recover 50% of maximum HP" or "remove the negative status." Their descriptions are Android's descriptions of what is left on Earth, like "Mined ore containing silver. Human history states silver was used to defeat demons, but machines seem impervious" in the silver ore's case. This enhancement makes players believe that what they saw during the game process is "existed," an actual component in the game world – to recognize their extra-diegetic actions as well as experience in the game world is also experienced by the diegetic characters.

The player sees what the characters see and does what the characters do. Thus, when the characters act and make their choices in the story, they tend to recognize their actions more, and at the same time, they acknowledge their identity as YoRHa members as well.

Figure 1 HUD of *Automata*

Just like player share the vision and perception of the world with the protagonists through the UI and HUD, the player's agency is also enhanced through the saving and loading game file function. The act of saving game file during the game process is, in essence, to update YoRHa Androids' current data and memory as well as other data for backup to the Bunker through the communication device. Then, if the protagonist drains the last health points during a battle, after the (re)booting loading screen, they would find their protagonist in a perfect condition, standing in front of the terminal where they lastly updated (saved) their data, but without all the items they have ever collected before – as they are still companying the protagonist's previous broken body lying around somewhere, waiting to be found back., is to

let the player identify with the protagonists, so as to recognize their Android characteristics. Thus, when the characters talk and discuss on their life and death, the player would understand what they refer to much more quickly, which actually makes it easier to achieve a deeper understanding of *Automata*'s narrative and arguments for the players. In addition, when the player fails the game at any other point after the fall of Bunker, the system would not automatically start over, and the player would directly face the "game over" screen. At the diegetic level, there is no explanation left for any remedy, and this function retreats to a systematic and extra-diegetic level solely. But at the same time, it indicates another vital fact: as the Bunker fell from the orbit, the YoRHa units – the protagonists – would, from the very moment they were born into this world, finally learned the inevitable death. From this point on, the player has to plan their action much more carefully – they would recognize the consequences brought by their own action and will in a more obvious way than before. If they made a critical mistake on their way which return the health points to zero, then the protagonist would meet their end and the player's progress might lost in vain in the next moment. In other words, this alternation to the saving and loading function aligns with the diegetic transition in the story layer, compelling the player to experience protagonists' situation in the extra-diegetic level. Thus, they would recognize their agency in a more explicit way, which aligns with *Automata*'s intention to illustrate this term quite well. From the perspective of unit operation, this design is to enhance the immersion and act as a facilitator of *Automata*'s argument in a positive way.

In addition, adjustments of systems in *Automata* are not only enhancement, its inhibition of certain systems is also another technique to stress its narrative – such as the achievements.

There are usually some trophies awarded to players for marking that they have achieved something "great" in the game – defeating a hidden and strong monster and discovering rare items, et cetera. However, after the player finishes the main playthrough of *Automata*, he or she will meet a new merchant in the Resistance Camp. His merchandises are these achievements – players only need to pay a small amount of money (compared to what players usually get when they arrive here), then all these entries are achieved. In addition, there is even no difference between buying the trophies here and achieving them through the gameplay at the system level – in the player's profile, the source of achievements obtained would not be shown. Thus, the "achievements" are not achievements anymore. Compared to other systems, the achievement is solely prepared for players – and in some cases, even their final objective in playing a game – to collect every one of them. However, this system plays little role in the narrative part – its existence would not be perceived by any diegetic object. While in the case of *Automata*, it appears nowhere in the story, even with no diegetic explanation like the config menu. Thus, it is not difficult to realize the reason behind this decomposition of achievements in *Automata* – it does not exist at all. Those who take *Automata* as a simple game would certainly gain happiness while playing. However, this decomposition clearly reveals one thing – a hint from the director: that is what *Automata* is not about.

From these summaries, we could find out that the player's actions are projected to both the game and narrative dimensions in *Automata*. In brief, Yōkō aims to entitle nearly every structural component in the game to a narrative function, even those usually not perceived as diegetic. This design significantly enhances the sense of immersion on the one hand since all the components and signs the player encounters during the playthrough contribute to the

worldbuilding in *Automata*, enriching various details from all these aspects. Referring to Meadows' (2002) discussion about the interactivity process, on the one hand, the player keeps promoting the story process and constantly receives feedback around the world he or she explores; on the other hand, the game system and world change the player as well. Through players' participation in the game, they also recognize their capacity to act in the process and their perspective of YoRHa members. In brief, these immersive systems and designs largely contribute to *Automata*'s worldbuilding faithfully reflect players' extradiegetic actions to the diegetic presentation in this world of game, which leads to a more precise presentation of player's agency as well as the recognition of this agency.

3.2.2 Diegetic layer: Ludic Storytelling

In previous sections I mentioned the game's narrative structure, the player could not reject the missions like searching for missing Resistance Androids and YoRHa units or supporting other squads in certain areas. However, sometimes they could still decide their outcome – for instance, when they found that their mission targets have already died, they could decide whether to tell their clients the truth or not. Also, when the story comes to certain points, the player could lead the story to different endings – yet, mostly in a much abrupted way. There are twenty-six endings in *Automata* in total. Five of them are "formal" endings of each playthrough (End A~E), and the other twenty-one are the interrupted endings, which occur in nearly every chapter of the game. It is hard to imagine that 2B suddenly activates the self-destruction program in front of the Commander during her mission reporting or leaves the

Copied City without any word instead of rushing to 9S's side. The interrupted endings are triggered by the actions causing the plot unable to develop alongside the designed story anymore. Most of these interrupt endings are counter-intuitive – most players would not even realize them during the playthrough if they follow the protagonist's personality. In that case, the description words in those endings seem to be much more reluctant and even humorous, explaining the characters' puzzling and strange behaviours from the diegetic level. Compared to the usual design of JRPG – to forbid the characters to do anything other than what is written in the script in the first place – this treatment in *Automata* is an improvement in increasing the player's agency to a moderate degree. By exerting their power over the protagonists in this way, the player manifests in the story implicitly. From another perspective, this could also be seen as wrestling settled between the director and player – the director wants to "force" the player to walk along with the story he settled previously. However, the player would not always follow his route. These interrupted endings are more like a compromise between them: the director does not recognize that player's choice fits the story, but he would still admit that it can lead to another future. Thus, from this perspective, the interrupted endings in *Automata* are interpretation and explanation given by the director for the choices made by players who deviate from the main story, nor does he recognize them as "what should happen in the story." This is, in fact, a much common sense in role-playing games. Even for the TRPG – where a human gamemaster processes all the divergences in the story – the freest game form in this category, it is still impossible to prepare a complete storyline for all the possible story routes. In addition, the fans of RPGs are quite used to being limited and directed by the game information system and follow them to reach the ending (Marron & Webb, 2005). There are

three potential functions from the aesthetic perspective of designing consecutive endings like this. Firstly, if the game is designed to have a consecutive structure, its theme is probably aligned and resonates with this design structurally. Secondly, this structure intensifies the tension between diegetic and non-diegetic teleology, which questions the mode of narrative structure through the connection from one end to more gameplay. Thirdly, they form a conflict between the designer's authority and the player's agency (Backe, 2018). This design also requires the player to actively explore the world of game and push the story into the next stage. In the case of *Automata*, each time players finish a route, they will receive a message indicating them that there is more content (a short text at the end of Route A and a trailer movie in Route B). As Yōkō mentioned in an interview, he hoped that as players continued playing the game, they would achieve a deeper and deeper understanding of it (Wallace, 2017). In other words, the story structure of *Automata* requires its audiences to exert their agency as the player and to a certain degree, forces them to (re-)interpret what they saw and experienced in previous gameplay (Backe, 2018).

Even if it claims to have twenty-six different "endings," actually, considering this structure, there is only one route and ending at last. End A and B are just a pause that happens in the half of the story from 2B and 9S's perspective, End C and D are the final chapter, and End E is the epilogue. All the remaining ones are disruptive endings like the protagonists fail at certain critical plot or their actions diverge from the main story route – which we could see that *Automata's* story is still in a linear form, much similar to a classical narrative like novel and play. This plot structure's strongest privilege emphasizes the literary aspect: rich stories, solid characters and detailed environments (Meadows, 2002). Yōkō has expressed ideas that

he hoped his work could provide players with a progressive experience – the further they went, the more they would know about the game. For instance, in *Drakengard 3*, if the player only finishes Divergence A, he or she would not have any clue about Zero's reason behind her doing unless arriving at Divergence D. Although *Automata* does not have different story divergences like it, this progressive idea remains the same. Hence, the limitation of space for players in the playing session is that they can only follow the established route set by the director (Schules, Peterson, & Picard, 2018). This structure has an exceptional advantage in the circumstance where the director aims at telling a story prior to simply playing a game, which much consists of Yōkō's idea of creation.

The minor choices mostly happen in side quests – besides the orders and quests given by Humanity Council and Commander, protagonists could also receive requests from other Androids as well as Machines they encounter during the adventure. This kind of situation lets players perceive their agency by allowing them to alternate the plot to a smaller extent. For instance, a YoRHa member in the Bunker asked 2B to find her teammate, 16D's remains left in her last battle. But 2B found that 16D attempted to desert her mission and died on the way. After that, she could choose either to tell her the truth or not, while the reward for this quest remained the same; the only thing that changed was whether to learn this member's true feeling towards 16D or not. Thus, to a certain degree, the triggering of side quests has already been a way of presenting the player's agency in the game. Differing from the mandatory quests in the main storyline, most of them need the player to actively explore the map, talk to other characters in the game and agree to take their requests. During the exploration, the player would also meet some special machines separated from their network to explore the possibilities in

their "lives" besides destroying enemies, indulging in their own business – taking care of animals, practicing martial arts and even designing games. The more the players explore the world, the more they would realize that all the components of this story are kept to the only one point – one's meaning of existence. Even if the player only focuses on the main storyline and ignores all the side quests, he or she could still have a glance, at least partially, at the YoRHa units' adventure in this world. At the fabula level, these events and quests lead to a consistent and coherent series of discussions over one's meaning of life throughout the whole process of playing, which reflects a particular aspect – unlike those works with much divergent story progress, the overall structure of *Automata* is much more solid and direct.

Actually, when we talk about these choices in *Automata* and examine them in a closer way, we can find that they are not accurate at all: what they make is an "illusion of choice," an implicit manipulation – although players are provided with many different choices in different points during the playthrough, in fact, they could not change the story. Like in the side quest "Archives in the Past", after finding the secret file, the player could choose to hand it in to either Pascal or Commander. Yet this decision still would not have much impact – neither Bunker nor Pascal's village survived in the riot of Machine network, along with all the data stored in those places. All the "routes" would still amount to the one and only final result – the ending of Project YoRHa. Even the instruction after End A calls the first playthrough "route," which enhances the false impression that it is a multi-linear and divergent story. The player could only change little things in the game in essence. Thus, here raising a question, if the narrative structure rejects the choice in the first place, then why do I still insist that *Automata* makes a valid argument about it?

In previous paragraphs, I mentioned the inherent limitation of video games. Yōkō has a quite clear cognition of this – as Juul (2001) and Aarseth (2012) argued, the interaction did not equal to the freedom and even agency. Thus, it is a conscious arrangement: since the limitation of possibilities is unavoidable, taking it as an essential narrative component could be a better strategy. This is a more diegetic-level suggestion for the lack of agency – at the extra-diegetic level, the player's actions are much less limited, which implicitly ensures this illusion. Just like the limitation of the game is an established fact, a conventional rule is accepted by almost everyone. Just as was argued in the discussion in Chapter 2, this manipulation or illusion of choice and agency is composed of a primary existentialism context, which enhances the diegetic contextualization – to let the player be in the same circumstance as the characters, leading to a deeper understanding of the work. It is an effective enhancement to the narrative part, which is exactly what Yōkō sought in the very beginning – to express a clear statement of his thoughts on some matters (Turcev, 2018). Just like textual words must be read one by one, a game has to be played from the first action to the last as well. In other words, the game progress, to a considerable degree, depends on the player's actions rather than the director's plan. However, there would be no such concern in a linear story structure. The player (protagonist)'s actions are implicitly (actions are allowed, but only certain actions could trigger game progress) or explicitly limited (only allowed to act in a certain area/execute certain actions), and the plot events would not change. Although the game stage of *Automata* is like a sandbox to a certain degree, actually, just like the story structure, it is still a fixed route, consisting of a series of quests and events which must be completed to reach the end.

On the one hand, this manipulation proves *Automata*'s objective in the narrative – this is

a solid argument rather than a vague question left unanswered, which verifies *Automata*'s linear narrative structure at its core – between providing divergent stories and endings and focusing on a single storyline, he chose the latter. This choice ensures the validity of his argument with the price of sacrificing the player's agency to a certain degree. On the other hand, this is also associated with another aspect of this argument, which I will further discuss in the upcoming sections. This linear structure is also a part of "the unreasonable world," or in 2B's monologue, "the unsolvable puzzle." When players realize this subtle suggestion on the absence of real choices here, they will have a more profound understanding of this existentialism context, which I described in the previous chapter. Moreover, this comes from an extra-diegetic perspective and is directly related to the role of the player and characters in this story – which will be discussed much further in the last section of this chapter. In brief, just like the characters in the story have to struggle with their predestined signs, the player also has to deal with their struggle against the game and stage – which is the existentialism argument made by the player, aligning with the character's response to the stage.

Thus, if we want to discuss the narrative in the game, we have to careful consideration of its specialty. In the discussion around game narrative, Henry Jenkins (2004) indicates several common views about them as the basic for them: firstly, not all the games are capable for telling a proper story, and they are not compatible with traditional literary analysis methods; secondly, there are games with narrative, and there are designers who aims to create narrative experience for players in the game; thirdly, the game ought not to aim at its narrativity primarily; fourthly, the experience of playing game and reading story are quite different; fifthly, game's storytelling is different from other media (2004, pp. 119-120). He aims to find a solution, "a middle-ground

position between ludologists and narratologists (2004, p. 119)" to this situation. Thus, he introduces the spatiality as this middle-ground, and its construction as the main characteristic of game narrative, or what he called "environment storytelling" (2004, p. 119; 122). Indeed, presenting narrative in game is a much more complicated situation, as he explains that, "game designer don't simply tell stories; they design worlds and sculpt spaces" (Jenkins, 2004, p. 121). In literary studies and analysis, the space is a much more abstract and implicit concept. It is an essential element for every completed action of a character since each of them has to happen somewhere (Bal, 2017). The space has two functions in narrative, one is to be the "place of action," providing a background environment for the events to happen; the other is the "acting place," which means that, the space itself becomes the foreground and the subject of description, influencing the fabula events (Bal, 2017, p. 127). Referring to Green's structural features, the space is closely associated with the worldbuilding – which is, to a certain degree, the "world" itself. In Jenkins's view, the game console is more like a device to generate spaces (2004, p. 122). Additionally, this space allows the designer to create a more immersive world and represent it in a more compelling way, where the players could interact with various objects at their will (Jenkins, 2004, pp. 122-123). Under this context, the game designers should consider them more as "narrative architects" rather than "storytellers" (Jenkins, 2004, p. 121). This indication also aligns with Bogost's suggestion that the space in the game is for constructing minor experiences associated to the main theme (2006, p. 159). In other words, player's recognition of the game world is built on the incidents and events happened in this space, along with the appearance of stage itself. And the stories in the game are born later than the construction of the game space.

For how to construct this immersive space in more detailed ways, Jenkins summarizes four possible ways to accomplish that, enhancing the environmental storytelling: "evoking pre-existing narrative associations; providing a staging ground where narrative events are enacted; embedding narrative information within their mise-en-scene; providing resources for emergent narratives" (2004, p. 123). Among these techniques, the emergent narrative might be the farthest from this thesis's subject, since it refers to forming the narrative during the gameplay, rather than providing a prestructured one to the player in the first place (Jenkins, 2004, p. 128). Which is, in fact, quite the opposition to *Automata*'s construction and never not appeared in it – *Automata*'s story-centred design of playthroughs has already been demonstrated in previous chapters. Also, the evocative space might not be that significant either – it is not produced based on an existed story, and obviously, unlike Jenkins' examples about *Star Wars* and *Alice in Wonderland*, *Automata* does not have this adaptation from some other previous works. Moreover, the objective of this precondition is to allow the audience to enter the world existed only in their imaginations before (Jenkins, 2004, p. 123). Yet, the core competency of this evocation is in the immersion provided here, which allows one's imagination to come true – to make an imaginary world more convincing. When it comes to the concrete example here, what *Automata* do is to utilize its systems and mechanisms, ensuring the player share a same perspective with the characters – just as what I illustrated in the previous sections. For the embedded narrative, although Jenkins argues that the designer should not assume that the player would discover every corner of the game, and ought to provide enough information for the player during their process. Indeed, compared to the sandbox-like works, the linear game structure design could reduce this impact to a large degree. *Automata*'s linear structure in

general does not allow much variation in it in the first place, although this design would regrettably reduce the gameplay. Nevertheless, at the same time, it is an effective enhancement to the narrative part, which is exactly what Yōkō sought in the very beginning – to express a clear statement of his thoughts on some matters (Turcev, 2018). Just like textual words must be read one by one, a game has to be played from the first action to the last as well. In other words, the game progress, to a considerable degree, depends on the player's actions rather than the director's plan. However, there would be no such concern in a linear story structure. The player (protagonist)'s actions are implicitly (actions are allowed, but only certain actions could trigger game progress) or explicitly limited (only allowed to act in a certain area/execute certain actions), and the plot events would not change. Although the game stage of *Automata* is like a sandbox to a certain degree, actually, just like the story structure, it is still a fixed route, consisting of a series of quests and events which must be completed to reach the end.

In a general overview of *Automata*'s playthrough process, its story consists of three playthroughs, or *"週目"* – which literarily means "round" in Japanese. Chapter 1 to 10 from 2B's perspective are called the Route A, 9S' perspective of Chapter 1 to 10 as Route B and Chapter 11-17 are Route C. These three routes have to be played in succession – the player must finish all stories in Route A for starting Route B and must finish Route B for starting Route C. Its storyline is progressed through completing missions given by Commander of YoRHa, along with optional missions given by other characters encountered all over the world. In the usual or designed playthrough process, the player would first view Chapter 1 to 10 with 2B as the protagonist and reach End A. The next round would be the same plot with 9S as the protagonist and finish with End B. Afterwards, the next time the player clicks the "new game"

option on the title page, it would begin with Chapter 11 and see the last half of this story from different protagonists in different stages, and reach the final ending. Although it seems that *Automata*'s world stage is much like an open sandbox, which allows the player to travel around the game world freely. However, when we look at its progress, we can find that its story is linear – there is no option for the player to diversify from it to other possible routes. And in the diegetic level, this linear structure is also a part of "the unreasonable world," or in 2B's monologue, "the unsolvable puzzle." When players realize this subtle suggestion on the absence of real choices here, they will have a more profound understanding of this existential context. Moreover, this comes from an extra-diegetic perspective and is directly related to the role of the player and characters in this story. In brief, just like the characters in the story have to struggle with their predestined signs, the player also has to deal with their struggle against the game and stage – which is the existential argument made by the player, aligning with the character's response to the game itself in the End E.

The narrative in game has two entry levels: the broadly defined objectives and localized incidents, or in other words, the gameplay goal in short and long terms (Jenkins, 124). *Automata*'s main narrative is constructed by quests, which consists of two kinds: mandatory main quests and optional side-quests. Compared with works with fixed playthrough, the rhythm control of *Automata* is processed more implicitly. Its world is a sandbox-like stage that allows the player to explore almost every corner, and the player still always has a lead during their playthrough – the main and sub-quests. As YoRHa units 2B and 9S are asked to carry out various duties. On their way, they would also meet many Androids and Machines, and they could take causal requests asked by them. This is *Automata*'s way to construct the enacted

stories defined by Jenkins. The more the player and character learn about their world (stage), the closer they would be to the main discussion and argument on one's existence in the work. In usual cases, the side quests are rewards for the player's curiosity and the exercise of their autonomy – "In short, side quests, in theory, create foundations and encourage, but also reward, in a sense, the player's inclination to use his independence in order to understand the world in which he finds himself" (Turcev, 2018, p. 216). Usually, this reward refers to items, weapons, skills, coins or EXP, like some side quests with a great difficulty might reward the player with a powerful weapon. It is much the same case in *Automata*, but there are even more rewards than items and chips in these side quests – the player could achieve a deeper understanding of the game world. In the Amnesia YoRHa side quest, players could learn the existence of Executer Type much earlier than A2's last revelation in Chapter 17 or get in touch with Machines' attempts at establishing interpersonal relationships among each other in Pascal's Village. Moreover, the quests suggested by two Operators 6O and 21O in Route A and B would affect their dialogues later in the main questline. 2B would hear 6O express her gratitude during the fall of Bunker if she sent 6O the pictures of flowers previously. Likewise, 21O's request to collect data in the Mammoth Residential area would let 9S have a peek at her desire to have a family, which would be reve0aled as her last wish in Chapter 16. These correspondences represent an approval for the player's actions at the diegetic level – the characters recognize what the player did for them. To fulfill 6O and 21O's requests is entirely a voluntary action – like other side quests, to fulfill them or not would affect the overall story progress in either the diegetic or extra-diegetic way. Overall, *Automata* encourages the player to do as many side quests as possible in their playthrough. All the side stories and quests in *Automata* appear on

the mini-map as red dots – a notification which indicates that there are many more things than the main quests in the world given to the player in a much more obvious way. Generally, the player's game progress is motivated by various different rewards. And this reward could be in various forms – virtual rewards like item and status in the game, or real rewards like the information about the game and story. In *Automata*'s case, if the player only follows the main quest route and pays no attention to these optional quests, he or she would learn much less about the story and world. Besides, even if the player only concern with missions given by the Bunker and Commander, he or she would still have no difficulty in understanding the overall story of *Automata* – the truth about Project YoRHa, the identity of 2B as well as Androids and Machines' position in this desolate world. This design ensures the validity of the main argument of the work under most circumstances.

In summary, for the narrative units' operation in *Automata*, they are undoubtedly the core components of this work and treated with more certainty. On the one hand, its mandatory main storyline ensures that the player would receive enough information about this work's central discussion and argument. And the optional side quests award those one who devote efforts into their attempts in exploring the game world. On the other hand, it constructs its narrative environment mainly through enacted and embedded stories, with the support of immersing space brought by evocation here. In brief, the diegetic level is supported by the extra-diegetic level in *Automata*, to present its argument about one's agency and existence, especially for the last stage of it – an extraordinarily vivid illustration of one's agency brought by the player.

3.3 The End of "Automata"

Thus, what is the agency of player in *Automata* here? Here we might first identify that how the player is positioned in the work – or to say, how the player experience this work in the diegetic level. For this examination, we might begin with the perspective and narrator, and then come to the role of player and character in this work. In the case of *Automata*, firstly, there is no clear narrator in it – the distinction between these components is so subtle. In narratology, the role of perspective is a complex term, as it associates with so many levels and components. Even to say that usually, there is no distinct narrator in a video game, and the distinction between focalization and narrator here is still not that clear. Focalization is the relationship between an agent, his vision, and what lies inside this vision, which is a component of the content of the narrative text (Bal, 2017, p. 135). To a certain degree, the focalization – or commonly called point of view – might influence or even decide the reader's interpretation of the text, especially when it is a first-person one. Just like some literary works that present their stories through characters' eyes, in the case of *Automata*, we also read this story through the "eyes" of three protagonists. Although, most of the time, it is the player who "controls" them. We still could perceive some of their thoughts through the particular game mechanism – such as 9S's hacking ability. In addition, the specific perspective during the gameplay also indicates the player's different degrees of agency in the game during this process, which will be further discussed in the following paragraphs.

The story is narrated to its audience through the narrator, who could be a character in the story. In this case, this focalizer is character-bound, which brings him or her an advantage over other characters in presenting his or her subjective perception. When the focalization lies with

a character who acts as an actor in fabula, it is called internal focalization. Relatively, when the focalization lies outside the fabula and presents as an anonymous, invisible narrator, it composes an external focalization (Bal, 2017, p. 136). It could be more objective when the narrative is presented through an external focalization. However, it is meaningless to seek absolute objectivity from narratives when the story is presented through various perceptions, especially when presenting a particular argument to its audience (Bal, 2017). An absolutely objective text is solely an accurate and precise description of a fact, but games are never fact. In the case of *Automata*, its focalization presents two aspects: operating the protagonist at the diegetic level and the camera frame at the non-diegetic level. From this perspective, the digital game is both externally and internally focalized. When it comes to *Automata*, the player's sight focuses on 2B in the first playthrough, then turns to 9S in the second, and in the last half, the focalization switches between 9S and A2. Besides the three protagonists, there are also some other operative characters switching during the game process, such as playing as Pascal to defend children before the factory in Route C or playing as a little robot carrying oil to its brother at the beginning of Route B. From this perspective, Yōkō strictly follows the principle of internal focalization in narratology – all the information players could acquire during the game progress is limited to the characters' accessibility. Like when playing the role of 2B, they could not open those chests with a hacking lock or discover the Machine's memories and data.

In this case, the focalization in *Automata* has another dimension – the camera frame. It depends on the graphic perspective – the position of the camera lens. Meadows (2002) indicates that video game's perspectives (frames) can also be divided into the first-, second-and third-person perspectives, concerning their expression on various levels of attachment, tension and

motivation, as well as the relationship and distance between the character and player. For the first-person perspective, the frame would be like what people see through their eyes in everyday life. It means that the player sees the game world through the protagonist's eyes and recognizing their identification. From this perspective, the player could see few or even no protagonist, like one or two hands, when the protagonist is executing actions. This perspective is usually applied to shooting and horror games for a better sense of immersion – what player sees on the screen is what the protagonist see in the world. The second-person perspective's camera is usually positioned slightly behind the protagonist in this case, or in other words, "above the shoulder." This perspective could open a small distance between the player and character. On the one hand, players can realize the character's existence rather than directly or completely substitute themselves into the protagonist's position. On the other hand, this distance is not that far from the characters. Thus, the sense of immersion and substitution is maintained at a relatively comfortable level. What the player views is still similar to the character's view, which means he is still looking at the game world through the character's identity and eyes. This is a distance between players and characters – an implicit indication that separates them away but still approves their association. The second-person perspective has been widely used in the role-playing genre, and in the case of *Automata*, it occupies majority of it in the playthrough. The third-person perspective means that the protagonists are entirely in the players' view, including their surroundings. The camera would be far and high above the character's head. For a small map, the camera might be fixed, and for larger ones, it would be centred on the characters with a full view of the surrounding environment, including all the directions, even those angles he could not usually see – like far away from their back. This perspective has the farthest distance

between the player and character, which indicates that in this situation, the player's agency in the game, at least to a certain degree, is usually limited to the actions that the character could and would do.

Figure 2: The first-person perspective (*Layers of Fear)*/the third-person perspective (*Final Fantasy IV*)

The focalization in *Automata* is variable, depending on many different situations and conditions. To take the battle of Simone as an example, it begins with a short cutscene and transits to the front view, then to a top view after iron bars falls into the theatre and then comes back to the regular front view again – swift shifts between the second- and third-person perspective. If the player is on Route B, there would also be an additional switch between the real and virtual space due to 9S's hacking. Similarly, the switch between different frames and characters happens along with the playthrough, indicating a relatively objective view of the whole story and allowing the player to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of its narrative and argument. These frequent switches and shifts allow the player to comprehend the work through different perspectives. The scenes involving first-person perspective is quite limited, only in the introductory chapter, when 9S was thrown to the Engel's top platform. In this scene, this shift of frame lets the player have a vivid impression about 9S's condition in this moment – complete inability in action, the only way to defend himself in waves of enemies

is to utilize the Pod, which lets the player to emphasize with 9S in an explicit way. Considering that the player finishes the same story in Route A, the introductory chapter in Route B ought to make a distinct difference other than simply changing the protagonist from 2B to 9S and adding new systems like hacking. In other words, using first-person perspective is the most efficient way to let the player recognize new protagonist here. Also, the first-person perspective in *Automata* also has another presentation form – the novel form like the conversation between 9S and Adam, and A2's memories about Anemone and her past. This focalization gives a deeper perspective about character's thoughts and emotion, grants player a closer look at them. In scenes with the third-person perspective, the emphasis is shifted to the environment rather than the protagonist, such like the Factory site and Forest Kingdom. In the previous case, this shift would give the players a better view of their surroundings, and let them recognize the world they are more impressively. In most of the time, the player would remain at the second-person perspective, looking at the protagonists in a relatively close distance.

For the focalization, it is still a mobile one depending on the character switching in different routes and situations. In Route A, it is centred at 2B's external focalization, then moves to 9S's internal focalization and reaches a zero focalization with much character switch in Route C. Just like its content, the focalization of Route A is on 2B and her external focalization – even the players play as 2B, there is still no way for them to know her inner thoughts at this moment. Moreover, as the first route in the game, Route A mainly introduces the world and gives players a basic idea as well as impression of the game stage. In Route B, with 9S's point of view, there are many scenes like "thinking aloud" – a sole repetition of the external view is not needed, as that is what the previous route is about. More and more characters' thoughts are

revealed to the player in this part. And when the players reach the end of Route B, they would achieve a much deeper understanding of this world, like some secrets hidden behind the Project YoRHa, and how the Machines think and act. Thus, we come to the last half of the story – Route C (Chapter 11 to 17). Ryan Wright studied the character switching in *Automata* and paid more attention to the involuntary switch – which he called "figure shift" (p. 2). When the figure happens, the player is offered a new perspective on the game world. He also mentioned that the player would recognize the characters more deeply through these shifts.

In brief, the focalization and point of view in *Automata* are presented in multiple forms and presentations, emphasizing a delicate balance between player and character. This design aligns with the layer-by-layer revelation of the truth about this world in the narrative. As the player switches from one character to another, his or her understanding of this story becomes deeper and deeper. On the one hand, the switching between different perspectives is in fact, not controlled by the play at all, in which is an inhibition of player's agency. Just like the main storyline, this design ensures *Automata*'s argument and expression, to let the player learn the director's intention while sacrificing player's operation freedom in a certain degree. Indeed, in a majority games the perspective would not shift as frequently as *Automata* – it is more like a fixed pattern. This unit here indicates and sustains the central argument and expression of *Automata*, while utilize every different perspective in different situations for fulfilling it. It assists to build the space and present the narrative, acts as the facilitator here. Or in other words, *Automata*'s practice in game focalization is, just like its predecessor *R/G*, does not keep the players in a fixed position in the game, and let them recognize the whole space rather than focusing on the protagonists themselves only. In which, this unit implicitly acts as an indicator

of the central argument about the agency of people in this work – the presence of player in the game.

For the players, identifying with a character in the story might enhance their connection to the game world; thus, in certain situations, players would simultaneously project themselves onto the characters and form an empathic link with them (Green, 2015). In a digital narrative, its centre ought to lie in the player rather than the character (Green, 2018). As the only entity with the power to "drive" the story forwards – regardless of the methods and degrees, the player's reputation in-game story is significantly unique. Due to the technological limitation and other factors, all the actions and choices in the game are designed by the director and programmer, making it impossible to do things other than that. Even if there are some salient options that provide them with the choices, to a certain degree, it is still an illusion of agency. At the diegetic level, all the actions, for most of the time, are still a presentation of the protagonists' will and agency. Thus, if we say that structures support this approval, then the characters in *Automata* would be the presentation of this agency in front of the player's eyes. In Chapter 2 of this thesis, I discussed the association of characters with the agency in *Automata* at the diegetic level. The presentation of agency at the diegetic level here manifests with the help of characters in the story. The character could be seen as the effect which occurs when a figure is presented with distinctive, mostly human characteristics (Bal, 2017, p. 104). Meanwhile, the narrator seems to be the combination of perspective and the protagonist's view. Referring to the previous paragraphs about the RPG genre, the player would always "play as someone" in the game world. This statement itself requires several premises: the existence of such a world and characters in this world as well as an indication that the player is outside

of it. In the prior discussions and demonstrations, we have already seen the first two premises in *Automata* and how they work to correspond to its argument and narrative.

Then it comes to the question here – what exactly does this action of "play as" mean on its stage? Barthes concludes the character as a function (1977), which we have discussed at the diegetic level in the previous chapter regarding the agency and choices. When it comes to the extra-diegetic level, this function has another layer – especially in the form of the video game. Under this circumstance, characters are not only constructed but only function in the story due to the presence of the player. According to different aims of the game, this function varies much more than that in textual works. We must define one premise in the beginning: what is the relationship between players and protagonists in *Automata*? *Automata*'s story does not allow a customized protagonist; they even have their own strong personalities, which means that they cannot be entirely replaced by the player, although the characters, especially the protagonists, are under the player's control more or less. Nonetheless, it still allows the players to take part in creating the work, to join, influence and alternate the narrative under certain circumstances. Video games always and must need the existence of a player, as the game has to be played and experienced by someone (Cermak-Sassenrath, 2015). As Barthes indicated, the authors' intention of work and readers' interpretation of it could lead to two (even more) different results. In case that a game is taken as the narrative, it does not only provide its audience with playing as the interpreting method but also ensures that they can see the result of interpretation immediately (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, p. 372). According to Meadows' four steps of interaction, a complete interaction cycle requires the system to give feedback on how it is changed by the order input (2002). To be more specific, the game's interactivity allows the

player to, at least to a certain degree, influence or change the story through their actions in the game. Waggoner suggests that the character can be the player's representative in the virtual world (2009). This suggestion could be applied to games without a certain protagonist image or identity, such as MMORPG or works with customizable protagonists like *Baldur's Gate*. But obviously, *Automata* is not one of them. Its protagonists have distinctive and vivid personalities – they could not be representatives, even though there are chances left for the player to decide their actions. Aarseth suggests three types of characters depending on their personalities and identities: "bots" for those without individual identities, shallow characters with little identity and "deep characters" for those with vivid personalities (2012, p. 132). This division is also associated with the director's design intention in narratives: whether the designer would like to deal with the story and play – those games aim at playing would prefer to emphasize less on constructing a deep character. *Automata* certainly belongs to the other kind – its narrative lies in the centre. Especially after the Bunker was destroyed, both 9S and A2 took actions on their own. Here the players could explicitly realize that they can only follow the characters' routines and act only as the executor than a decision-maker. This consideration, firstly, ensures *Automata*'s valid narrative in the first place, just like its many endings mentioned before – an implicit hint about what its argument is about and what story development it approves. This establishment is undoubtfully valid, which I have discussed in the previous chapter. What *Automata* does here is not simply establishing characters. It invites the player to the stage, not in the form of taking character as the representative, with the help of this permissible boundary between the player, game mechanism and narrative.

When we discuss the presence of players – not characters or avatars – inside the game, we

usually use the phrase "breaking the fourth wall." It originates from the stage plays in the theatre, referring to the division between the auditorium and stage - what happens inside or outside the play. Usually, there are three visible concrete walls around the back and both sides of the stage. Although the front of the stage is open to the audience, there is still an invisible fourth wall to divide actors and audiences – actors would not notice the existence of the audience in front of them, even if they are just a few meters apart. And the act which blurs this division and lets the actor(character) realize this the presence of the audience is called "breaking the fourth wall." In Conway's description, this breaking refers to the glance from the diegetic world to the extra-diegetic world (2009). In *Drakengard 3*, Yōkō realized this technique and used it for the first time, but in a quite implicit way: using the splattered blood on the frame to indicate that player was just looking at the story created by the protagonist rather than really taking part in it. This is also a cautious attempt to associate the player with the story. It obviously suggests that the characters' actions are more out of their own will rather than the player operating them, distancing the player from the story – they are complete onlookers here. Yet, if to say that *Drakengard 3* presents a complete external focalization and rejection of the player in the story, then *Automata* shows another possibility – involving the player in the story.

We have already discussed how *Automata* approves the player's agency from various aspects in previous sections. When talking about perspectives and focalization, we found that the player stayed in the second- and third-person perspective and external focalization for most of the time. Even if sometimes they could listen to the characters' inner thoughts, like 9S' monologue in End D, its proportion is still quite limited. Thus, players' appearance on the stage

happens in the last part of the game, when they complete the story and witness the end of the last YoRHa member (End C/End D). During the credits, the Pods carry out their final mission: clearing all the data of YoRHa units. However, Pod 153 detected the leakage of 2B, 9S and A2's data from the Android database and requested Pod 042 to cleanse them for the YoRHa project. However, after a silent moment, Pod 042 refused to carry out his mission for a reason it could not specify. In the next instant, the credit list stopped and turned into the final shooting game – the names of all the production teams became enemies, and this time, the small arrowhead in the centre of the screen was not 9S's, but represented the players themselves. In the beginning, it was not so difficult. However, as the credits rolled to the latter, the density of bullets would become higher and higher, which would reach an ever-impossible difficulty in the latter part. Every time the player failed, a question would appear in the dialogue box, asking the player whether or not he or she believed in the value of this story, this game, and their efforts. After repeatedly failing and rejecting to give up, the player would enter the last stage – he would get support from other players' save files, this time, if being hit by a bullet, a save file from another player would block it for him, and then lost in vain. After the player defeated the last line of the credit list, he or she would enter the last scene of *Automata* – Pod 153 carried body parts for 2B and 9S, along with 042, who attacked in a "stupid" manner and received much damage from it.

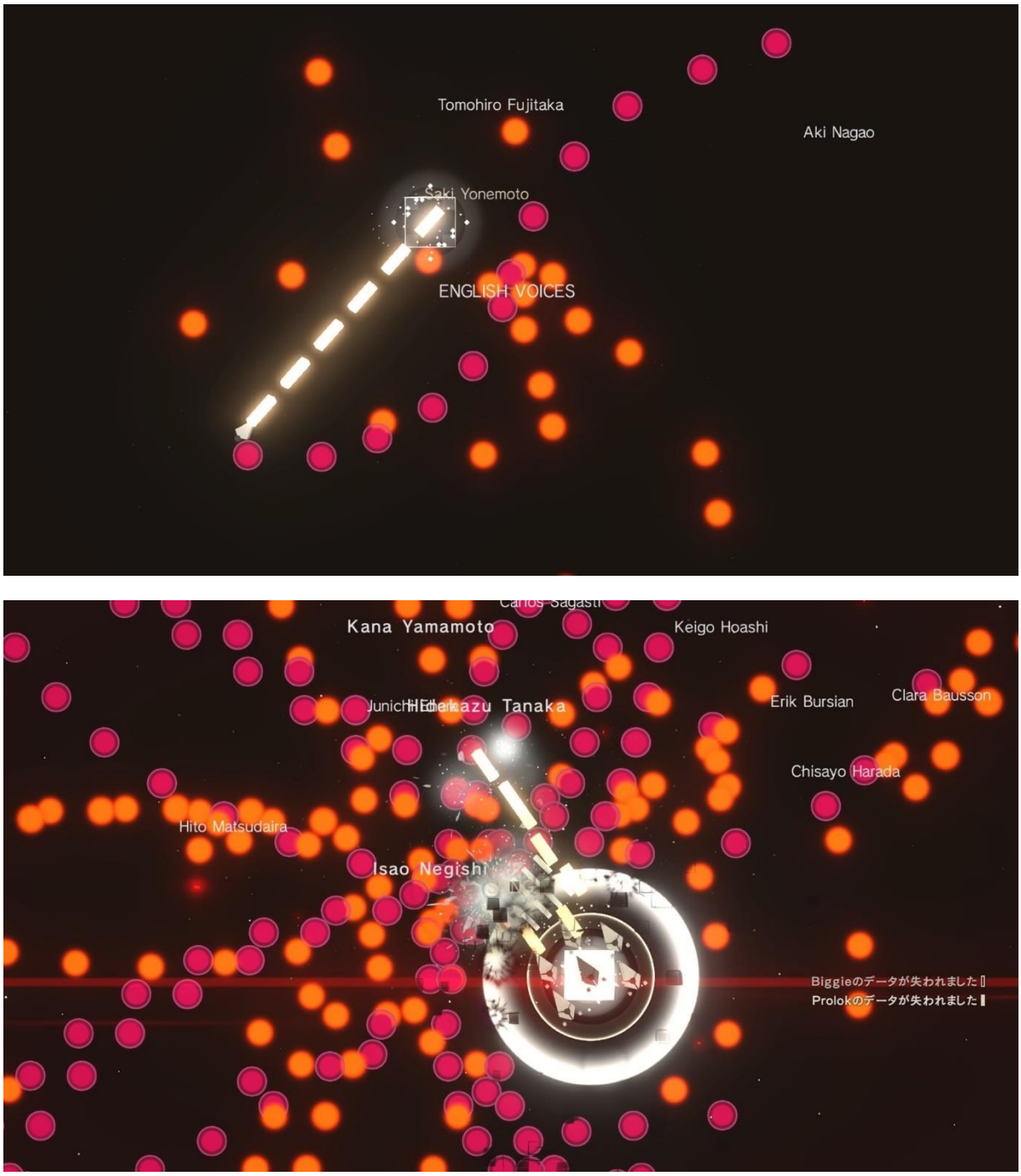

Figure 3: The last hacking stage

Furthermore, suppose the player decided to leave a word to other players struggling with the credits shooting game. In that case, he could do the same thing as those players who helped him before – to sacrifice his save file and block one bullet for another unknown player. After several times of confirmation, the player would watch their every play record and menu

component being erased in front of their eyes. Indeed, this is still not the first appearance of a similar mechanism in Yōkō's works. In its predecessor, *R/G*, the protagonist also faced a similar situation. Compared to the sacrificing in *Automata*, this "choice" seems to be much more relentless and compulsive. Even the director himself understood this – he did not admit that he made this mechanism with the producer in the first place since no game director would let players delete their save files after devoting so much effort to it (Turcev, 2018). Nevertheless, this design's re-appearance in *Automata* seems to be improved much from *R/G*. This choice itself – to sacrifice the player's save file – is not mandatory. To save Kaine required Nier to offer himself up; whether the players decide to delete the files or not, they would still found that 042 and 153 rejected their initial mission, attacked their network firewall and saved the protagonists at last. From the diegetic point of view, this ending is highly abstract and symbolic. Like the cursor represented 9S in the normal playthrough, this cursor in End E represents the Pods in the last shooting game. However, unlike 9S's hacking case, the cursor has another extra-diegetic meaning here – it is also a conversation between the player and director. As the last question before the final duel, the one who asked the questions that appeared during the last shooting game did not identify himself. What 9S faced in his battles were the firewall programs of Machines and Androids, and the player faces the creators of this game – the creators of this world. In other words, they are the "God" mentioned in 2B's first monologue, the ones who trapped them in this unsolvable puzzle, the perpetual cycle of life and death. Thus, this final shooting game perfectly corresponds to the last line – after dozens of hours, the players finally have the chance to kill this "God." This stage is the "death of the author" literally.

Thus, to reach the final end of *Automata* requires the player to exert their power of choice

- to "kill" the creators of this world. As Sartre argues, the only way to actualize oneself is to put one's idea into reality through action and choice (1970). All the other things disappear in the last stage, with only a small cursor, a black background and a credit list left on the screen. Hence, there are no more signs in the game world to tell the player what to do. From this point, all the diegetic components retreat from the game world, and there is only the player and creator of this game left. From this point, players finally make their appearance on the stage, and the director invites them to answer a simple question: would you like to accept; or choose another route to help these protagonists take this chance to kill this "God"?

Furthermore, this question is not like the previous choices, which could be simply made with one click. Instead, it must be answered by a series of questions and completing an extremely tough shooting game. This is the only point in the game where the player could not use the auto chips to help them "skip" the battle. This stage design is undoubtedly, aligned with the central argument of *Automata*– one's future must be taken into one's own hands. With the help of the gameplay system, this is not only a description, but also becomes a reality that the player must face and overcome. If a player gives up at any point during End E, the story will return to the beginning of Route A – indicating that the Project YoRHa moves to the next stage, and another cycle of life and death begins. At the diegetic level, giving up here means accepting this project and its end – to accept that they are born to die. As long as the player is determined enough to pursue another future, he or she would eventually reach the end – after several failures, there would be other ones joining this trial, which reduces the difficulty to a quite great extent.

Automata is about a world where all the people lost or rejected their "essence." The

protagonists' adventure also lets them meet various Androids and Machines who are confused about this question. Its discussion and argument are closely centred around the only topic – the meaning of one's existence. In the last stage, he prepared a stage in the last chapter exclusively for the extra-diegetic player. Facing the questions about the existence and value in game and reality, the only way to answer them is to introspect one's own thoughts on them. Moreover, when players answer this series of questions about reality through the choices, they also choose the final ending for the protagonists simultaneously. Thus, this stage fulfills the most significant part of *Automata*'s argument – the choices can change the game and a life. From this point, the player also become a part of *Automata*'s narrative and argument. This is how the world is constructed in *Automata*, which is also what the protagonists and players want to change through their actions and choices altogether. After the end of the story, when Pod 153 recited the opening monologue again, the last two sentences changed. "However, life is all about the struggle within this cycle. / That is what 'we' believe." This is also what they do in the story. For those players who see these lines, this is also what they do in the game.

From these demonstrations, we could clearly see how *Automata* constructed its narrative and gameplay altogether to present its main argument to the audience. At the diegetic level, the characters exert their agency as much as possible. At the extra-diegetic level, the player's capacity to act is exerted through the gameplay system, faithfully reflected at the diegetic level and then fed back to them, forming a complete interaction process cycle. From narrative to gameplay, and from content to structure, all the discussions and arguments are pointed to the same centre. This is not a common design among video games – not many of them could organize their components in such a close association – that is, the reason behind its moving

resonance and persuasive argument.

Chapter 4 A Beautiful Song: Conclusion

In previous discussions, we have seen how *Automata* construct its diegetic narrative, and how it immerses it into the extra-diegetic components. Obviously, the narrative contributes the crucial core of *Automata* by a great degree – without narrative, *Automata* would not exist as what it is in present. In which draws a new question here – what role could the narrative play in the game; and what could we learn from it? The discussion in *Automata*, or in a more general sense, social critiques in Yōkō's works, is his exploration of a series of questions about men and life as well as his answers to several questions indicated in his past works. When Yōkō was asked about this (relatively) promising end of *Automata*, he answered that:

> … because the protagonist kills so many enemies, it wouldn't feel right if I gave them a happy ending after killing so many people. But for 2B and 9S, of course they kill a lot of enemies in this game as well, but they have been killing each other over and over again. In that sense, I felt like they're cleansed of their sins, in a way? I felt that it would be appropriate to give them a happy ending (2018).

Yōkō does have the intention to give a definite answer than leaving a space for discussion, like in *Drakengard 3*. As the interviewer indicates later, this answer is more like a judgment or sentence passed by him on characters on their behaviour (2018). Although this could be out of a simple view of virtues and vices, in which believes the good should be rewarded and the bad should be punished, this noting of sin and punishment still shows a potential influence from the Christian view. In the case of the twin Androids Devola and Popola, this idea is obviously presented. They were firstly designed as the administrators of Project Gestalt. After this project failed, other Androids believed that they were responsible for it – even it was not them who

caused this failure. This pair of Devola and Popola in *Automata* are the last two of this set of models, whose previous memories were removed, and they were implanted a programme to feel responsible and guilty for the demise of humanity, leading them to keep yearning to atone for a sin they had never committed – which was much like an "original sin." The direct quotation of Japanese cultural traits in *Automata* is quite limited, despite the blacksmith Machine in the Forest Castle with the name Masamune and some katana weapons. In my opinion, *Automata*'s main Japanese context appears in its diegetic presentation in the form of some character's self-identification – to define oneself by one's position in a social context.

As a director who devotes so much to the video game as an expression form, Yōkō gives a solid answer to a series of questions he has ever doubted, like the "praise" for killing in *Drakengard* and the absolute correctness in *R/G*. In fact, they are not novel ideas in fantasy works. When we review ideas and argument in past works, it is common that we find there was already someone before we share a similar thought or even reach a conclusion we just come up with. Even if we turn to some works which are well-known for a particular plot design, we could easily find that they are usually not the first to come up with the idea or apply that design in those works. In other words, their way of compositing this narrative makes it. Thus, what exactly makes them outstanding among all? When video games show their great potential in conveying ideas and argument, a structural analysis could give us a possible answer. It is the method which focuses on the work's construction, on how it expresses its theme by breaking it down into different components and revealing its functions in the whole work. Compared to textual narratives, video games could make their arguments more persuasive. Rather than passively listening and following others' instructions, the digital game allows its audience to

actively and voluntarily do so through the conventional game rules acknowledged by every game player. The initiation of a game requires all the players to acknowledge the game rules in the first place. For instance, an experienced JRPG player would seldomly complain that he or she could only move within a few places or locations, strictly following the playthrough. All the games have a goal of winning, whose value is reflected in their rules – exactly what behaviour would lead to success in the end. (Gergen, 2015) This convention is what Yōkō mentioned in an interview, that is, there are more and more invisible walls in game making and playing, together with the stereotype like "the games should be made/played in this way" (Kishi, 2018).

Video games are the expression result of the possibilities provided by their consoles, which lead to the result that they could only be a simplified simulation of reality (Cermak-Sassenrath, 2015). Compared to classical narrative forms like novels and plays, the game players have a more evident recognition of the unrealistic elements in digital games. Moreover, its experiencing method – to play – is a behaviour associated with entertainment, "concerned only with its own success and not interested in any consequences beyond itself. It aims at a process and not at a product" (Cermak-Sassenrath, 2015). The director of *Dark Souls*, Miyazaki Hidetaka, also expresses a similar idea – the result of a game is constant, that is the player's success in it (Menuez, 2017). This result also enhances its difference from the logic in real life. A fictional fantasy work is a reaction or response to the real world, which could be acceptance, rejection, or critique. In this case, the audience recognizes its unreality through its narrative contents and elements confronting the realistic ones as well as wishes for an improvement in reality, which requires willing and voluntary "cooperation" between the work and the reader.

(Iles, personal communication). When this feature is combined with the conventional rules of digital games in a well-designed way, it will make the argument in the works much more persuasive.

Referring to Lindley's definition of game, when talking about the goal-direction or goal-orientation in the game framework, we all approve that the result of a game, or to be more specific, the success of a game is the primary driving inspiration for resuming the play. Cermak-Sassenrath argued that playing was only concerned with the victory at last, aiming at the procedure, not the result – there was even no result outside this process in the interest of this activity (2015). Nevertheless, this idea has been receiving more and more challenges in recent years. Miyazaki, director of *Dark Soul* series, indicated that with the help of the saving and loading progress files, the completion of goals in the games (e.g., defeating the enemies) would become an inevitable result after several attempts. Thus, there is no suspension about whether the protagonist would complete his or her goal in the end in most digital games. To a certain degree, this characteristic indicates that the cycle of cause, process and result of digital games is a fixed paradigm in most common sense. Hence, he started his exploration in this aspect. The playthrough of *Dark Souls* is a process composed of a cycle of the construction and destruction of players' adventure. The information they acquired during the game process is fragmented and contradictory, which means that players have to piece all the fragments up to deduct the truth behind everything they encountered in the process. His exploration of narrative in the game tends to be more like the destruction of the conventional paradigm of the events in fabula – cause, effect and result. Comparatively, Yōkō pays more attention to the "text" and "story" in his attempts, which could be revealed in previous discussions in this thesis.

Although many studios have devoted their passion and effort to this area, and they received much good feedback and praises, like *YOU and ME and HER: A Love Story* and *Doki Doki Literature Club* (Nitroplus, 2013; Team Salvato, 2017). However, regarding their reputation and popularity – the text adventure game is not a popular genre. In *Life is Strange*, players are completely excluded from its story by limiting the diegetic protagonist's choices and actions. This story of Max and Chloe involves themselves only. The player's possible choices and actions in the story offered by the game are constructed based on the protagonist's personality. In the case of *Detroit: Become Human*, they did receive very positive comments and good performance in business (over five million copies sold (Doke, 2020)), especially the previous one. By replacing the textual description and plane graphics with real-like and motion-capture models, these interactive movies do create a more immersive environment for the audience. However, it is hard to argue that they make a breakthrough in the narrative part on the basis built by previous text-adventure games. *Detroit: Become Human* seems to involve the player in its narrative implicitly – the serial number on the game disk suggests that the player's identity in the story is the so-called "RA-9", who is the messiah and saviour the androids wished and worshipped. However, this revelation is not closely associated with the plot or players' interpretation of the story. The androids in the story have a specific leader, Markus, for their rebellion; the player does not need the above information to understand this work in the story. Neither of the storylines requires the actual manifestation of RA-9 at the diegetic level. In brief, although this work also attempts to associate players at the diegetic level in the game, this effort still falls in vain mostly due to the weak association.

Another recent good example of exploring the boundary between game form and content

in the role-playing game category is *Undertale* (Toby Fox, 2015), which emphasizes the mechanism of save files, consecutive endings and their impact at a more general level. In this work, certain characters could detect the action of saving and loading files done by the player and interpret it as "the change in the timeline – stopping, resuming, rewinding… and we could do nothing about it". It also utilizes the narrator lines – there are many details in the game revealing that the narrator is also a character in the game. In addition, with the help of specific technical methods, the director ensures that every time a player reaches an end, it would leave a "permanent" record in the game file, and the impact of that ending would be reflected in the conversations as well as other textual content in the following playthroughs. For instance, some characters would mention that "you did good last time." To a certain degree, this is an immersion of "player as character," a little different from the "player as player" in *Automata*, but still, it is also a good attempt in this field. Moreover, it also makes use of the Special Thanks list at the end of the game – yet, instead of granting it a diegetic significance, it only designs a simple shooting game with a stinger room at last. Considering *Automata*'s publishing year, it is fine to say that Yōkō might draw inspiration from this trick as well. Nevertheless, one controversial aspect of *Undertale* is its recognition of the player in the story – to refer to the previous statement, the involvement of the player in *Automata* is the "player as player." However, things are different in *Undertale*. Its involvement is more like "player as the character." Along with a narrative trick on the protagonist's identity, Toby treats players as a component of the game and provides them with a scripted orientation and expectation to a certain degree, which, as a result, turns to pass judgments and comments on their in-game behaviour.

The discussion in previous chapters mentions that this kind of blending of the game genres is Yōkō's usual attempt to break the "thinking set" of role-playing games, to apply defamiliarization to the game system (Gerrish, 2018). Nevertheless, these flaws are more likely to be associated with the aspects including technical level, data design and programming than narrative ones. Thus, I prefer to leave an in-depth analysis to fellow scholars who aspire to devote efforts to this topic from a more professional perspective in the near future. In addition, this examination of *Automata* also shows video games' potential in making profound and comprehensive literary and cultural arguments.

Bogost criticises the idea that game solely serves for "fun," affirms it as that "help us expose and explore complicated human conditions, rather than offering mere interruption and diversion." (Bogost, 136) Also, he refers to Murray's opinion on the relationship between narrative and technology, argues that this new association lead an approach to the technology-based works. To a certain degree, Bogost does expect the game to become an innovative medium as a creative work's form. As a fantasy work created by a Japanese director, *Automata* reflects a kind of transition in the ideological and philosophical value from the traditional and classical Japanese ones to a more contemporary set of value. This work is a magnificent example in which demonstrating the result of global cultural communication in the contemporary era. From the perspective of philosophical argument, Yōkō's opinions and arguments presented in his works – including the *NieR* and *Drakengard* series – show a dedicated integration blending both the traditional and more contemporary views on many philosophical issues. Like, there is a classical Japanese philosophical view of life and death in the destiny of YoRHa members – "Everything is designed to end." However, at the same time,

the final answer given by Pod 042 to the perpetual circle of life and death is more like the idea from Sartre's existentialism – a western philosophical opinion. This combination presents a global interchange of ideas and thoughts, showing us how the imported philosophical theories influence Japanese people's views on specific issues.

I do not doubt that Yōkō will continue exploring the themes and techniques in the video game field in the future. Fassone has ever stated that every game is an island since it is enclosed by its content, rules, ending and limitations; even the so-called ones with an open world still have their extremities due to technical and other reasons (2017). Although the fluidity of the RPG category brings us difficulties when we attempt to give a precise definition, it also indicates another promising prospect of it – it is a narrative form with numerous developing potentials. Due to the increasingly lower cost of technologies, the number of digital games' target audiences could only get larger and larger, and this trend will irreversibly continue in the visible future. As audiences of these works –guests of these islands, we have every reason to respect them through our participation and interpretation.

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