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Intro to Game Studies

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***Nier: Automata* and Nietzsche**

Those who play Yoko Taro's *Nier* will quickly realize that there is much more than meets the eye in terms of how it tackles its themes. I would like to posit that *Nier* is a conversational piece with the philosophies of Friedrich Nietzsche, referencing some of the concepts he raised in his numerous essays and rebutting the conclusions that Nietzsche drew from those concepts. *Nier* establishes through its structure and through character development the philosophical concept of the eternal return—that your life, that all of our lives, are being repeated ad infinitum. This concept is central to many of Nietzsche's writings, and he uses it to support his human ideal of ethical egoism. *Nier*, after establishing the eternal return, uses it instead to refute those claims. *Nier*, in direct opposition to Nietzsche's conclusions relating to self-interest, uses the eternal return as a motivation for establishing communal values and to raise a hope that our world rampant with self-interest can be changed.

To establish this, first I will outline the arguments of Nietzsche. I will then go over the methods that *Nier* uses to establish eternal recurrence as one of its main themes, the analysis up to this point will be objective; it is important to get an objective look at Nietzsche's arguments and *Nier*'s various adaptations of the eternal return before we attempt to understand how *Nier* brings those two into conversation. Then we will analyze how this adaptation is used within both the macro-narrative and micro-narratives and how those narratives and the player interaction within them contributes to a direct critique of Nietzsche, and on a larger scope, a critique of the over-valuation of self-interest and the despair that brings to us as a people.

Nietzsche first brought up the idea of the eternal return as a question for his readers to ponder. Martin Heidigger explains in the second volume of his discussion of Nietzsche: “The way Nietzsche here patterns of the thought of [eternal recurrence] makes it clear that this ‘thought of thoughts’ is at the same time ‘the most burdensome thought’ ” (Heidigger 25). Nietzsche originally poses eternal recurrence as a hypothetical, a thought experiment. It is part of his rhetorical strategy to attempt to convince his readers of his ultimate argument. From *The Gay Science*:

What, if some day or night a demon were to...say to you: "This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence....

Would you not throw yourself down and...curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: “You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine.” (Nietzsche s.341)

There is a lot to unpack in these two paragraphs. We see Nietzsche’s establishment of his hypothetical; a demon comes to you and tells you that for eternity you are going to live the same exact life. Every small detail will be the same, everything “unutterably small or great....” He then poses the question, what would you do? Would you curse the demon speaking these words? Or would you venerate him, wholly thankful for the words you just heard? Nietzsche ends the section with the open question of how one could become disposed to thinking the latter, which he attempts to answer in his following book: *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

The overarching concept in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is that of the *Übermensch*—the overman. The overman, as Nietzsche (through his character Zarathustra) puts it, is to man as man is to ape: “What is the ape to man? A laughingstock or a painful embarrassment. And man shall be just that for the overman: a laughingstock or a painful embarrassment...” (Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, 3). The act of becoming the overman will push man past its current state, to a higher state of being. How does one get to become this overman? Nietzsche says that part of it requires *amor fati*, a love of fate. The idea that one not only accepts the state of being, does not strive to change the way things are, nor resent the past but one loves this state of being. An uncompromising acceptance of reality. In his own words: “My formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati*: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary...but love it” (Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo* s.10). Acceptance of our reality, and an adoration for it is only the first step to becoming overman though, the other is forsaking your morals.

To Nietzsche, to become the overman we must reject the master-slave morality that started with Judaism and continued with Christianity. In his *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche challenges the contemporary notions of ‘good’ vs ‘bad’ as a supposition of the religious in order to assert themselves as the righteous. He instead claims the original meanings of the words ‘good’ and ‘bad’ meant to denote nobility and the lack thereof. “Instead it has been the ‘good’ themselves, meaning the noble, the mighty...who saw and judged their actions as good...in contrast to everything lowly, low-minded, common and plebeian” (Nietzsche, “ ‘Good and Evil’, ‘Good and Bad’ ” s.2). It began with the Jews, for Nietzsche, and their rejection of the “aristocratic value equation” (s.7) this cascaded down, what Nietzsche calls the “slave’s revolt in

morality” (s.7). Placing the benefits of the righteous in those who are oppressed, rather than the oppressors.

This flipping of the morality system applies to the overman in the sense that the overman overcomes this supposition of the slave morality and instead reverts to the ideals of ‘good’ of old: noble, aristocratic, warrior-like. Rüdiger Safranski in his biography of Nietzsche argues that Nietzsche saw the overman was embodied by ruthless warrior pride and artistic ambition, embodiments of ruthless leaders like Machiavelli and Cesare Borgia. The overman is not held back by the slave morality system imposed on modern man, rather he is emboldened by his own nobility to do as he pleases. He has superseded morals and lives his own life. Through a combination of his love of fate and re-adoption of the aristocratic morality system, the overman welcomes the eternal return, he relishes in the ability to live his life over again. This ties in to a central ideal of Nietzsche: ethical egoism. The idea that caring only for yourself is the reasonable, and right thing to do for your own happiness. Compassion, Nietzsche says in *Genealogy* is unhuman. Humans are naturally cruel beasts, and forgoing that makes us miserable. Therefore we as people owe it to ourselves to lack compassion, to be egoist and only act with our self-interest in mind.

Now that we understand how Nietzsche establishes and uses eternal recurrence to posit his philosophies on how man can supersede themselves and become something greater, let’s look at how *Nier* uses eternal recurrence. The story of *Nier* revolves around a proxy war fought between the androids created by humans in the image of humans, and other robots (referred to as machines) which were created by an alien race to do combat with the humans. One of the androids is designate 2B(attle), a combat droid who is programmed to remain calm and composed no matter the situation. She treats her partner, 9S(canner) with near-contempt as they

proceed through the first part of the game. It is eventually revealed that 2B's classification is 2E(xecution), and she exists solely for the purpose of destroying 9S when he learns too much. It is explained that 9S, because the S designations were designed with maximum intelligence, always eventually finds out the secret that humanity has been extinct since long before the proxy war even began. To maintain power over the androids, the commanders perpetuate this ruse. After 9S is destroyed, he is created anew with a wiped memory, so 2B is forced to kill him repeatedly (hence her cold attitude toward him, to make it easier to do her job). The cyclical nature of this character relationship is clear. There is an eternal recurrence for both 2B and 9S, 9S goes through the process of figuring out the conspiracy and then is killed by 2B, and 2B is forced to kill her partner repeatedly ad infinitum.

Additionally, the way Nier structures its story plays into the cyclical nature of games themselves. The main story is separated into 5 distinct 'endings' which are experienced sequentially. In a sense, the player is forced to play the game repeatedly to get the full experience. Two of these endings, the first and second, are even the exact same plotline played from different perspectives (2B's and 9S's respectively). After this the game's plot does continue, but the core structure of the game's plot remains the same. The androids go to fight the machines, who don't want to fight but go rabid because of the control of their masters. More melodrama ensues in the plot thread of these chapters, but that's at the core of what's happening in each of them, history repeating itself.

It is here that I would like to bring up the work of Ian Bogost, specifically his writings on procedural rhetoric in *Persuasive Games*. Bogost defines procedure as the orderly way in which we do things, the way we as people carry things out. 2B's character is defined by the way in which she follows procedure, and since 2B is the main character we interact with, we identify

with that procedure, even when that procedure comes to killing 9S. This makes the emotional effect of breaking procedure, which is when 2B gets overwhelmed with emotion after 9S dies for the umpteenth time, that much more powerful. We can tie this back to the topic of eternal recurrence.

Now that we've established how Nier uses eternal recurrence, how does it use its ways to criticize Nietzsche? We see multiple instances of these androids being stuck in an eternal return, and what I would like to argue is that the androids are also very Nietzschean in their behaviors. They exemplify attitudes pertaining to that of the overman, and yet, they are miserable. It is the machines, who begin to adopt ideals of community and altruism, who are happy before the interference of the Nietzschean androids. If we look at the androids as a whole, they have a strict orderly system reminiscent of that of nobility, they are forced to lack compassion, 2B kills without mercy, without thinking of the possible sentience of the machines (the fact of which is very clearly established early on). But 2B is miserable. 2B welcomes death when it comes to her because 2B can finally end the eternal return for herself. She turns to 9S and smiles because she has finally broken free.

9S as well, is caught in a cycle. A cycle of dying repeatedly and being reborn in the same circumstances but without any of the knowledge he gained. He forgets his relationship with 2B, with the other androids, all he remembers is his mission. 9S exhibits Nietzschean traits in his pursuit of 2B as a romantic interest. The game acknowledges that he only attempts to be nice with her at first because he finds her attractive and wants to be intimate with her. She gives him no reason to be nice to her, she is cold to him, cold to the machines that they are slaughtering, she exhibits little to no emotion, but still he pursues because of his carnal desire, something

Nietzsche praises. 9S is also miserable. He sees no purpose in being, even though his purpose is designated to him.

Meanwhile the machines are forming communities and assisting each other. One such community, one run by a machine who named himself Pascal (yes, that Pascal) even welcomes 2B and 9S into the village willingly despite 2B's clear hostility toward the machines. Pascal teaches the members of his community ideals of altruism, generosity, and community. And ostensibly, it is these machines who are the happy ones. Pascal's village prospers and grows, they are shown numerous times to care about one another and help each other out, they are just much happier than 2B, 9S, or any other android. Additionally, the reason for the tragic events of the latter half of Nier is explicitly because of those who hold power; the aristocrats for lack of a better term, who command their armies and force them to fight endlessly. Because of this everything falls apart. The very characters who hold the values that Nietzsche defines in his writings, the characters who are closest to being the overman are the ones who are the most miserable and cause the most misery.

The most poignant part of Nier, and the part that cements this game as a criticism of Nietzsche comes with the final ending. To be succinct, the game has you do battle with the credits. Nier turns into a 2D shooter and you must attack the credits before they kill you. This sounds frivolous, but what makes it poignant is that it is impossible to complete... without help. Eventually the credits start coming too fast, and not only that, they are repeated. Forever the credits will come at the player and kill their ship repeatedly. Does this sound familiar? These final credits in and of itself is an eternal return. At a certain point, the game asks if you want help. If you choose to be stubborn and keep at it on your own, whether it be out of pride or simply refusal to get help, the player will be stuck. The only way to get help is to accept the help

of a player who has completed the game. But not only must a player have completed their game, they must be altruistic and give up the one physical thing that many gamers find meaning in: the save file. The game only lets you send help if you delete your save file. This sequence exemplifies the idea that we *can* break out of these cycles. We need not subject ourselves to the misery of striving to be the overman and doing the same thing over and over again. With the help of others, we can break free.

This can be related back to the real world. Ideals of community, of altruism, of forgoing selfishness could go a long way in healing our world. These sentiments are confirmed by the game itself in a post-credits sequence. 2B, 9S, and A2, having been carried away and brought back in time by their helper robots, lay unconscious on a cliff. One of the helpers says to the other: “Won’t the same thing just happen again?”

The other responds: “That may be the case, but we must try.” No matter how many times we bang our heads against the wall to try and fix things, we must keep at it. There is no reason to forsake others and the world and subjecting yourself to striving to be some kind of ‘overman’ which will ultimately just contribute to your misery. By using the concepts of Nietzsche and turning them on their head, and by forcing the player to take part, Nier promotes this kind of worldview, and after subjecting players to hours of misery, ends with that positive outlook: maybe one day, we’ll fix things.

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