Melancholic Vortex and Postwar Pacifism in *NieR: Automata*

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Abstract

The 2017 videogame *NieR: Automata* introduces philosophies into its gameplay through its extensive references to philosophers such as Blaise Pascal, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Simone de Beauvoir (PlatinumGames/Yokō 2017). What makes *Automata* distinctive is, however, its tactics of embodying philosophies. *Automata* "recaptures" (Harpold 2007, par. 6) gameplay elements such as gameplay loops, menu interfaces, and save files as a means to recruit the player into the in-game discourses. *Automata* is a game about humanity told in a posthuman fashion. It is, therefore, imperative to note that *Automata*'s posthuman setting is allegorical to Japan's postwar double consciousness. Precisely, *Automata*'s fictional narrative parallels Japan's roles as both the victimizer and the victim throughout the Second World War. This paper frames *Automata* as a postcolonialist text. Reading it against the backdrop of Japan's postwar modernity, this paper aims to demonstrate how *Automata* works through Japan's postwar pacifism in an almost undetectable manner. *Automata* masquerades its postwar ambivalence as universal existential angst. This paper employs Ranjana Khanna's work on "mourning" and "melancholia" (Khanna 2003, 23) to provide historical and cultural specificities that are often taken out in examining Japanese video games as cultural artifacts. This paper analyzes *Automata* as a text of postwar melancholia. Such melancholia is not aimed at revising a colonial past nor creating a cautionary tale about colonialism. Rather, it is a series of postwar reflection, complicated by Japan's guilty conscience towards its colonial past and the melancholia around its traumatic losses, specifically the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. By contextualizing *Automata* with cultural specificity, this paper provides a deeper understanding of what formulates the player experience. In this vein, the paper suggests that postcolonialist studies can provide a generative framework in understanding what is prioritized and what is deemphasized in face of the increasingly globalized gaming industry.

Introduction

The 2017 video game *NieR: Automata (Automata)*, directed by Yokō Tarō, tells a story about humanity in a posthuman manner (PlatinumGames/Yokō 2017). Assuming positions with three androids, the player encounters different failed machine collectives that operate on different unfaithful interpretations of Europeanist philosophies and theologies. With extensive references to European philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Friedrich Nietzsche, *Automata* explores themes such as existentialism, psychoanalysis, and feminism. A video game that smuggles philosophic rhetoric is, by no means, groundbreaking. For instance, the first-person shooter trilogy, *BioShock*, bakes ethical ramifications into its gameplay (2K Games/Levine 2007). What makes *Automata* distinctive is, however, its tactics of embodying philosophies. *Automata* recaptures gameplay elements such as gameplay loops, menu interfaces, and save files to recruit the player into the in-game discourses.

Terry Harpold defines "recapture" as a process that "the gameworld recaptures traits of hardware or software, repurposing them to its own ends and masking their potential disruption of the world with information that is notionally distinct from it" (Harpold 2007, par. 6). As maintained in previous scholarship on *Automata*, the game's looping mechanic is thematic to Friedrich Nietzsche's eternal recurrence (Jaćević 2017, 2) (Gerrish 2018, 7).

Building on existing scholarship, I suggest reading *Automata* against the backdrop of Japan's postwar double consciousness. Working through the lens of postcolonialism, I aim to demonstrate how *Automata* works through Japan's postwar pacifism in an almost undetectable manner. *Automata* masquerades its postwar ambivalence as universal existential angst. To dissect *Automata*, a video game, using a literary frame, it is crucial to foreground how concepts such as melancholia have been explored in Japanese literature. I wish to present the folktale, Urashima

Tarō, to work through how loss is often situated in Japanese literature.

Melancholia and the Tale of Urashima Tarō

The tale of Urashima Tarō is one of the most well-known Japanese folktales. The earliest iteration appears in *Fudoki*, which dates to the Nara period or the 8th century. It eventually found its permanent tenure in Japan's nationally designated textbook. Unlike many other fables, the moral lesson of Urashima Tarō remains ambiguous. A young man named Urashima Tarō is invited by the dragon princess, Otohime, to stay at the underwater dragon palace as gratitude for saving a turtle. After a few days enjoying the wonders of the dragon palace, Urashima Tarō becomes homesick and decides to leave. The princess fails to persuade Urashima Tarō to stay so she sends him home with a box as a parting gift. The princess asks Urashima Tarō not to open the box under any circumstance. Back on land, Urashima Tarō soon realizes that decades have passed. Everything and everyone he knew has long gone and he is ae a stranger to the land he once called home. Anxious and paranoid, he opens the box, despite the princess's warning, and white smoke comes out. When the smoke fades, Urashima Tarō realizes that he has become an old man.

This story has been adapted to serve as different allegories. For instance, Joshua Hotaka Roth maintains that "[T]he story of Urashima Taro allows Japanese immigrants to acknowledge their distance from Japan and at the same time identify with it" (Roth 2003, 113) in his study of Japanese Brazilians. Another instance treats the story as an allegory of dementia (Fujii, Butler and Sasaki 2015, 279). While there is no consensus on the "moral lesson" of the folktale, what persists in Japan's collective consciousness is its ambiguity and openness to interpretation. Here, I propose to read the folklore in a postcolonial frame.

Psychoanalysis, one key methodology of postcolonial studies, is problematized by postcolonial feminist Ranjana Khanna in her book *Dark Continents: Psychoanalysis and Colonialism*. Since psychoanalysis is entrenched with euro-centric and patriarchal subconscious, Khanna suggests reading psychoanalysis "ethnographically." Only by working through its colonist undertone, one can apply psychoanalysis without the trap of self-preferentiality. Psychoanalysis is built on myths and literature, such as Greek mythology and William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (Khanna 2003, 23). Khanna maintains that classic texts are often interpreted and reframed to unveil the inner workings of a subject matter. For instance, Wulf Sachs writes about postcolonialism in his book, *Black Hamlet*, which is informed by Sigmund Freud's interpretations of *Hamlet*.

Sachs contextualizes what is missing in Freud's initial work by working through colonialism and "blackness."

I propose to read *Automata* as literature and connect it to Japan's postwar modernity. Given *Automata* is a video game, I will evaluate its narrative as well as its game mechanics. Through textually analyzing *Automata*, I aim to demonstrate how Khanna's melancholia is at the crux of Japan's postwar modernity. Khanna's melancholia is built on Abraham and Torok's differentiation between "mourning" and "melancholia," which are two different ways of working through loss (Abraham and Torok 1994, 125). Mourning is about coming to terms with the lost object, and the sadness that comes with loss will abate over time. Melancholia, on the other hand, is the refusal or inability to mourn or to introject. This refusal turns into anger or the desire to hold onto anything that reminds them of the lost object. In this case, the lost object's absence is not taken figuratively, rather it is replaced with something literally. The replacement, however, cannot be introjected to alleviate the sadness so it is swallowed whole.

Urashima Tarō is awarded for his valiant effort of saving the turtle, but why is he punished for returning home? Reading the story through the lens of melancholia might elucidate this ambiguity. Becoming a stranger to his home, Urashima Tarō feels the need to address the sudden and unanticipated loss. Instead of mourning the loss of his ideal home, he turns to the only thing might be tied to this past – the box. The box does not provide the cure to his nostalgic desire but is a literal placeholder for his lost love-object. Thus, his rapid aging becomes the punishment for his refusal to mourn what he has lost. Urashima Tarō's story suggests the difficulty of dealing with the past, a ceased sense of belonging, or a void left by the loss of the ideal. Different iterations of the folktale, which often involve characters finding lost memories, reflect different Japanese collective consciousness. While World War II (WWII) has long passed, its legacies persist in Japan's modernity as pacifism, national trauma, and ill-sublimated desire for power. *Automata* can be read as a postwar iteration of the tale of Urashima Tarō in the vein that it is about recovering hidden truth and the critical melancholy, which derives from dealing with the void left by the lost ideal. The key is to ask, "what is in the box?" The short answer is the suppressed desire for victory and expansion, or the colonial desire, which is interrupted by the end of WWII.

Postcolonialism and Video Games

There is a growing body of work standing at the intersection of game studies and postcolonialism. Soraya Murray proposes postcolonial theory as a critical

intervention to the emerging field of game studies by noting that "…the popular depoliticization of video games as part of a larger perception that they do not constitute a part of culture contributes to a troubling and persistent lack of a complex engagement with this dimension of games" (Murray 2018, sec. 2, para. 6). Working through game series, such as Age of Empires and Civilization in which history is made playable, Souvik Mukherjee maintains that "the video game medium offers the simultaneous possibilities of subalternity, protest, elitism, and hegemony; it is the actualization by the player that results in a deeper understanding and experience of the postcolonial" (Mukherjee 2018, 518).

While a postcolonial frame is productive for examining Japanese video games, I hesitate to situate the traditional colonizer/colonized binary in the Japanese context. Japan was never officially colonized and, secondly, Japan's postwar interventions, imposed by the United States, are often characterized as neo-imperialism rather than colonialization. That said, postcolonialism, which often prioritizes cultural studies and psychoanalysis, can be generative when thinking through Japan's postwar condition. I chose the word "postcolonialist" since it denotes the broader postcolonial studies and the fact that "postcolonial" cannot be perfectly situated in the Japanese context.

Postcolonial in the Japanese context is better understood as post World War II, or simply as postwar. In her comprehensive work on understanding Japanese postwar modernity through the Final Fantasy series and Metal Gear Solid series, Rachel Hutchinson links motifs of nuclear energy and Hiroshima bombings to the larger discourse around Japan's postwar identity and its relationship to their wartime "victimizer," the United States (Hutchinson 2019, 207). In these cases, Japan's postwar victimhood is highlighted against the backdrop of the atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. On the other hand, Hutchinson also notes how "Japan's cultural and historical 'Self' is privileged" over their colonial "Others," such as Korea, in Bandai Namco's SoulCalibur series (Hutchinson 2019, 234). The duality noted by Hutchinson reveals Japan's double consciousness as both the victimizer and the victim in WWII. When applying postcolonial studies to games made in Japan, such double consciousness complicates the traditional binary. This double consciousness then translates into a lack of comprehensive reflexivity, in which both positionalities are examined equally, pertaining to colonialism in its cultural artifacts. In his discussion of Resident Evil 5, Paul Martin explains this double consciousness through the two opportunities the game offers to the assumed Japanese player, "the first is to perform a sanitized and exuberant version of colonialism without guilt. The second is to perform a normalized contemporary global Japanese subjectivity" (Martin 2016, 580).

Automata, as an artifact of Japan's postwar modernity, highlights Japan's postwar melancholia. Such melancholia is not aimed at revising wartime history nor creating a cautionary tale about colonialism. Rather, it is a series of reflections, complicated by guilty conscience towards its colonial past and melancholy around traumatic loss. One product of Japan's postwar reflection is pacifism. Japan's postwar pacifism takes on a narcissistic form. The traditional colonizer/colonized binary cannot be established because it does not exist. The colonized positionality is not reserved for the former imperial Japanese colonies, such as Korea and Taiwan, but is taken by victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, whose colonizer's role is fulfilled by the United States. James J. Orr maintains that "Japanese pacifism and its supporting construction of the war experience came to rely on an image of self as victim" meanwhile downplays the "consciousness of self as victimizer" (Orr 2001, 3). This aspect is also noted in other medium, such as film. Shaun Duke explores the "underlying libidinal systems of colonialism" in Shinkai Makoto's The Place Promised in Our Early Days by focusing on the theme of duality (2014, 390). While the postcolonial subject's desire to overturn empire through repetitive revolutions is explicit in the film, there is also the desire to "reset to zero" (Duke 2014, 406). Such layered consciousness can be disentangled into a wish to move beyond the colonial/imperial identity and a desire to create a fantasy where the traumatic loss does not exist.

This ambivalence is further complicated by the dissonance between the nation-state and its citizens. Kuan-Hsing Chen argues that "in a way, the entire intellectual history of Japan since the Second World War can be read as a critique of the self, specifically the complicity between the population and the prewar militarist state" (Chen 2010, 10). While the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were traumatic events, with severe ripple effects in Japanese society, the nationalist narrativization of these tragedies constructs them into collective trauma. Khanna maintains that "the chosen (collective) trauma… takes on a particular resonance for the history of the people, their most deeply felt cultural affiliations and anxieties, and collective symbols of a community" (Khanna 2003, 14). Hiroshima, as a symbol of Japan's postwar pacifism, is both a reminder of the lost empire and a foundation for its postwar victimhood (Ueno 2004, 151). Two contradicting

interpretations are baked into Japan's national identity, which engenders an ambivalence that can be characterized as melancholia – the refusal or inability to move beyond the lost object. This is not to say melancholia is something to be corrected. I simply wish to highlight it in order to unveil the complicated nature of metaphors used in Japanese fictional texts that deal with Japan's postwar modernity.

Automata and Double Consciousness

Automata's plot centers around fictional wars between machine lifeforms and androids. Machine lifeforms are slave laborers manufactured by aliens after invading Earth. After rebelling against their alien masters, machine lifeforms fell into existential crises and begin to mimic human civilization by following, often Europeanist, philosophies. Androids, on the other hand, are artificial descendants of humanity. Androids are the only playable characters. The player shifts perspectives amongst three androids: 2B, 9S, and A2. Androids are created under the project name YoRHa. YoRHa androids are designed in the image of human whereas machines' design echoes toy-like robots. Automata is the sequel to Nier (2010). These two games exist in the Drakengard series' universe, which is also created by Yokō Tarō. The ontology of Yokō Tarō's fictional universe is marked by trauma. For instance, the Drakengard series' protagonists are given traumatic pasts, such as loss of parents or sexual violence. Notably, the protagonist's sexual trauma is a running theme in Drakengard 3. The Nier series deals with the aftermath of the Drakengard series. Nier sets in fictional Japan where Tokyo was destroyed by a giant alien entity, summoned by the protagonist of Drakengard 1, falling from the sky. The remains of the alien entity spread a contagion that would eventually kill off all humanity. In many ways, the alien entity and its contagion are allegories of the atomic bomb and its radioactive pollution. As the sequel to Nier, Automata deals with the collective trauma of losing humanity by working through Japan's postwar double positionality. This duality is illustrated through androids and machine lifeforms. For instance, Automata's fictional narrative parallels Japan's role as both the victimizer and the victim throughout World War II. By adding 10,000 years to the fictional timeline, YoRHa's history corresponds with WWII events. For instance, June 26th 11945 of the fictional timeline is the day when the Android Bunker was destroyed while June 26th, 1945 marked the formation of the United Nations. On August 6th 11945, machine lifeforms erect a tower with the intention to eliminate the last bit of humanity, August 6th, 1945 was the bombing of Hiroshima. Lastly, September 2nd 11945

marked the end of the 14th machine war, while September 2nd, 1945 marked the end of WWII and the surrender of Japan.

Even though the fictional machine/alien and android/human can be situated into a colonizer/colonized dichotomy, such a dichotomy does not exist in *Automata*, at least not in the traditional sense. *Automata* prioritizes Japan's postwar identity as a victim. As stated earlier, the narrativization of victimhood in postwar texts is not often reserved for former colonies of imperial Japan. While there are acknowledgments of guilt toward imperial and colonial past in *Automata*, they do not extend beyond Japan. Both androids and machine lifeforms are postwar subjects. They represent different manifestations of melancholia organized around a traumatic loss. Although androids and machine lifeforms mourn over different losses, they share the same practice of incorporating another object in the place of a void. This universalizing aspect creates slippage between machine lifeforms' and androids' positionalities. This intentional design makes it difficult for the player to formulate a clear dialectic regarding who is the colonized and who is the colonizer. The fictional narrative first situates aliens as the invader who created machines to aid them in colonization. This is later subverted through the revelation that humans have gone extinct by the time aliens invaded. Machine lifeforms overturned their alien masters and created colonies of their own, which could situate them as the colonizer. This is, again, subverted: assuming control of 2B, the player encounters different machine lifeforms on earth, and it is implied that androids understood machine lifeforms as primitive and incapable of complex thoughts. How machine lifeforms are "discovered" and "demystified" by the military-grade androids seem to attribute indigeneity with machine lifeforms and positions androids, artificial decedents of earth's original denizens, as the invader. Machine lifeforms have become indigenous to the fictional earth whereas androids only have an artificial ancestral claim to it.

It is now clear to see how the aforementioned double consciousness remains narcissistic as they point to the fictional earth, or the metaphoric Japan, as the origin for discourses of both the colonizer and the colonized. Such a universalizing aspect of contemplation of postcoloniality places emphasis on trauma, which leads to a form of pacifism that downplays colonial desire. This is further demonstrated through *Automata*'s usage of "android," "machine," and even "automata." All imply delegation of dreaded responsibilities and lack of agency. This double consciousness, therefore, highlights two aspects of melancholia. First is collective identity formation via

traumatic loss. Second is the failure of assimilating incorporated discourses that were not designed for the subject.

Playing Around the Void

I shall first explore how collective identity formation is demonstrated in the game through its gameplay. The player has the option to play through the game multiple times from different characters' perspectives. In doing so, the player unravels the mystery and recover erased memories, similar to the tale of Urashima Tarō. There are 26 end states to the game, corresponding to the English alphabet's 26 letters, but only A to E are the real narrative end states. In order to reach ending E, the player repeats certain narratives. The first and second playthroughs are somewhat evenly split between the character 2B and 9S. Then the third playthrough cuts back forth between 9S and A2 at an accelerated rate. By the climax of the game, the player will play 9S for a few seconds in battle before shifting to A2. Each android's motivation is marked by a loss or a void. It is also thematic that all YoRHa androids' uniforms are black, often adorned with a black vizor or a black veil, a motif that often suggests grief.

Melancholia, a process of grieving, is unsuccessful mourning organized around the void left by the lost object. The void is suspended in a state to which there is no return. For the void is untouchable, it can only be addressed by forming a circular architecture with a void in the center. Working through Jacques Lacan's concept of sublimation, Viviana Saint-Cyr maintains that architecture, as a sublimating practice under art, is but a void: "It (architecture) only exists to present the void around which it is organized: it exists unto the emptiness it surrounds*"* (Saint-Cyr 2012, 15). Motifs of void are ubiquitous in *Automata*. For instance, the secrets of machine lifeforms are hidden in a huge cavern beneath the city. A motif that both signals the Lacanian void and functions as a metaphoric explosion crater. Additionally, there is a cutscene detailing how machine lifeforms become self-aware by realizing a void within themselves. Since they have renounced their scripted role by killing off their master, a void is left behind. Machine lifeforms attempt to define their void by filling it with different things, which they call "treasures." These incorporated "treasures" are impossible to assimilate – a symptom of melancholia.

Allegorically, identity formation through a traumatic void is first explored through the first set of antagonists in *Automata*. 2B and 9S find a group of machine lifeforms simulating sex, labor, and nursing in a sunken cavern. Bewildered by the fact that machine lifeforms cannot

organically reproduce, the group decides to investigate. After engaging with them in battle, the machine lifeforms start to form a ball that resembles an embryo. A naked humanoid male is born out of the mechanic embryo. The android-looking male is without genitals. The story only proceeds if the player engages with this android-looking machine lifeform in battle. After ministering a few attacks, the player is confronted by the machine lifeform's wretched questioning of the player's cruelty. Even if the player ceases all attacks at this point, it is too late. The humanoid machine lifeform begins to evolve at an accelerated rate and the player is left with no choice but to kill him. Once the player eliminates the target, out from his blood, an identical humanoid machine lifeform emerges. Literally born out of trauma, he cries in anguish and escapes with the body from which he is born.

It is later revealed that the first humanoid machine lifeform named himself "Adam" and his brother, who sprung from Adam's blood, "Eve." In a later development, Adam kidnaps 9S in hopes to negotiate with 2B. 2B finds Adam in a place he created and named it "copied city." Adam creates the city, a sublime architecture of humanity, in hopes to understand more about humanity. Adam incorporates human's discourse in order to make sense of his own existence. Because Adam's identity formation is characterized by being the "other," he wishes to become the "self" by making himself human. Adam reveals to 2B that he has disconnected from the machine network, which will make his death permanent. He does so because he believes death is what makes life meaningful. Eventually killed by 2B, Adam's journey portrays the disastrous eventuality of incorporating a discourse that was not designed for him.

Eve, who literally emerges from trauma, embodies the manic aspect of melancholia. He is born to repair a loss and to protect it. Eve's existence is the manifestation of melancholia, a refusal to mourn. After Adam is killed by 2B, Eve turns to vengeance. While Eve has a justifiable reason to do so, his story arc denotes his identity formation as a manic embodiment of melancholia where a refusal to mourn becomes the desire to erase anything that is deemed to have caused the initial loss.

Melancholic Vortex

The tragedies of Adam and Eve elucidate the second aspect of Japan's postwar melancholic double consciousness. Adam and Eve's narrative reflects melancholia at an individual level whereas other machine lifeform colonies exemplify the collective melancholia. Assuming positions with three androids, the player encounters different failed machine collectives that operate

on different unfaithful interpretations of Europeanist philosophies and theologies. These failures can be read as "relative impossibility of assimilation" (Khanna 2003, 164). Furthermore, by positioning the player with androids, *Automata* transforms the gameplay into a grieving process. I wish to call the narrative pattern "melancholic vortex" to demonstrate how it is tied to Japan's postwar modernity.

In *Automata,* failed attempts of assimilation, or incorporation, is personified through machine lifeforms parodying western philosophers by taking on their names. *Automata* puts Blaise Pascal and Søren Kierkegaard into a conversation about western theology. The machine Pascal is a pacifist leader. He creates a village for his fellow disconnected machine lifeforms while cultivates human emotions. Machine villagers form families even though they are not related to each other in the human sense. The machine Kierkegaard is ironically the deceased spiritual leader of a cult nested in an abandoned factory. Unable to mourn the loss of their leader, the cultists conclude that their leader has achieved godhood via his demise. Believing they can join him through death, the cultists commit mass murder and suicides. A manic manifestation of melancholia. During the third playthrough, the player assumes control of A2 to assist Pascal in fighting off an approaching danger. In hopes to protect the children, Pascal hides children of his village in the same factory once occupied by the Kierkegaard cult. After defeating the colossal machine lifeform while leaving the children behind, they return to the factor only to find the children have died by suicide. Blaming himself for teaching children human emotions, specifically fear, Pascal asks A2 to either wipe out his memory or kill him. Both real-life philosophers theorize how the existence of god and the importance of faith inform human's understanding of death. *Automata* parodies these ideas to highlight the impossibility of assimilation. Machine lifeforms Pascal and Kierkegaard form collectives outside the network through imitating humanity. Because the discourse of humanity is not designed to address that of the machine, these subaltern collectives crumble under incongruity.

This incongruity is further explored between YoRHa androids' involvement with another outside-network machine collective, the forest kingdom. During the first and second playthroughs, where the player assumes positions with 2B and 9S, *Automata* introduces Immanuel the king. Immanuel is the resurrected king, in the form of a baby machine lifeform, of the once most well-run disconnected machine collective. After Immanuel's body malfunctions, other machines of the kingdom decide to upload his consciousness into a baby machine, hoping it would grow

and rule again. Of course, the baby will never grow, and subjects of the kingdom perform endless maintenance and protection just to keep the baby alive. The act of preserving the cult value of the king becomes the sole purpose of these machine lifeforms. A2, presented as an antagonist during the first two playthroughs, shows up just before 2B and 9S approaches the baby king and kills him. Shocked by A2's action, 9S questions her cruelty. It is here when A2 asks 9S and 2B to question YoRHa by comparing themselves to the machine subjects of the forest kingdom. Resonating the mantra of YoRHa, "glory to mankind," YoRHa androids are no different from the machine lifeforms, operating on the myth that there is a cure for their traumatic loss. The loss of humanity for YoRHa androids and the loss of Immanuel for the forest kingdom are both irreversible. Their losses are incorporated while melancholia defines their collective identity.

At a glance, Machine lifeforms appropriating Western philosophies to create their own societies seems to serve as a commentary on Japan's postwar reconstruction. By pointing out the incongruity between Western ideologies and machine lifeforms' actualization, *Automata* seems to suggest the limitation of postcolonial mimicry. Homi Bhabha defines mimicry as the "sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline which 'appropriates' the Other as it visualizes power" (Bhabha 1984, 126). In the Japanese context, mimicry can be understood as coming to terms with its identity as the "other" in the Western gaze and turning the "other" into "self" through mimicking the West. While Japan's modernization project, in which "modern" is characterized by Western enlightenment, traces back to the Meiji period (1868 – 1912), WWII is the at the crux of Japan's "postcolonial" mimicry (Ueno 2004, 9). In other words, Japan's postwar "self" is articulated through the traumatic loss in 1945. The incongruity proposed by *Automata* does not pin Western influence as the malady of Japan's modernity, it problematizes the idea that becoming the "other" is the only way to construct a "modern" identity.

Assimilation or Detachment

Everything machine lifeforms do ends in failure and each philosophy adopted is later revealed to be inassimilable. They are forever trapped in a vortex of "repetition of the colonial past" (Hook and Truscott 2013, 167). The opening line of *Automata* perfectly illustrates this repetition,

> Everything that lives is designed to end. We are perpetually trapped in a never-ending spiral of life and death. Is this a curse? Or some kind of punishment? I

often think about the god who blessed us with this cryptic puzzle and wonder if we'll ever have the chance to kill him (PlatinumGames/Yokō 2017).

The "never-ending spiral of life and death" statement evokes the Buddhist concept of reincarnation and Saṃsāra. YoRHa androids do not die like organic humans. When their body is destroyed, as long as their consciousness is backed up, they can reincarnate by uploading it into another body. In-game death is made diegetic whereby the player can retrieve or repair their old body when they reincarnate. The themes of suffering and incarnation indicate the game's Buddhist influences. *Automata*, without overt references to Buddhism, hints at an alternative to address melancholia.

Automata has few gameplay loops that require the player to play it repetitively. While each repetition can grant new perspectives or knowledge, a dreadful rhythm is composed as the undertone to resonate with the idea of *Saṃsāra*, or endless suffering. This idea is explored in-game through the collapse of machine lifeform collectives. Unable to assimilate human ideologies to create meaning of their own, the machine network builds a tower with the initial intention of launching missile strikes — a manic symptom of melancholia. By the end of the game, the network informs 9S that instead of launching the missile strike, they have decided to use the tower to launch an ark. An ark that contains "memories of the foolish machine lifeforms" and "sends those memories to a new world" (PlatinumGames/Yokō 2017). The launching of the ark contrasts with the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The visual motif here not only references the biblical Noah's Ark but also implies a melancholic revision of Japan's traumatic loss. Considering the machine network's ark through postcoloniality, *Automata* reveals the desire to redefine meaning outside Japan's imperial/colonial past. The tower was designed to launch missile strikes at the lunar base where the last trace of humanity is stored. Instead of bombing the last bit of humanity, the tower wishes to change the course of action by disengaging from this endless cycle. This choice by the machine network can be read as detachment.

The ultimate form of detachment is nirvana in Zen Buddhism. It is an end to suffering. This theme is reinforced when the game recruits the player into the narrative. Both ending C and ending D show that all android protagonists have died. The game then breaks the fourth wall by asking the player directly if they wish to resurrect them. When the player chooses yes, they are asked to play a shooting game that becomes increasingly difficult and almost impossible to finish. After a few failures, the player is advised to seek help from other players via the internet. By accepting assistance, the player can complete the game easily. *Automata* then asks the player if they wish to provide the same support for others by giving up their own save files. In other words, an extradiegetic sacrifice and a literal detachment from the endless reincarnations. Instead, the death of the fictional characters, the player's symbolic death becomes the final end state. Raul Moncayo, whose work combines Lacanian psychoanalysis with Zen Buddhism, maintains that "the desire of the analyst, which is a desire for emptiness or for no particular object, can be seen as a desire for death, for Nirvana, for the serenity of a symbolic death that gives rather than ends life" (Moncayo 2013, 230). *Automata*, through its game mechanic, allows the player to assume the role of the analyst where nirvana, the player's symbolic death, grants freedom and life to the playable characters.

This solution, at first, seems to propose Zen Buddhism as the way to escape the vortex of melancholia. This, however, does not address the fact that while the player is now free from the consequences of postcoloniality, the in-game characters might repeat the same cycle. This is illustrated through the resurrection of the main protagonists during the post-credit scene. When the pods, assistant robots to the androids, are rebuilding three protagonists after the player's sacrifice, they begin to wonder if they would repeat the same cycle. Instead of leaving a definitive interpretation of melancholia, the game provides a hopeful answer through one of the pods. The pod acknowledges the potential repetition of the past yet it states "a future is not given to you, it is something you must take for yourself" (PlatinumGames/Yokō 2017). This end quote reframes the postwar melancholia as something generative rather than deterministic.

Structural Overlay

The process of working through melancholia welcomes structural overlay from a variety of philosophies and theologies. In some instances, precisely because this structure is wide-reaching, it helps one thing to masquerade as another. In *Automata*, the void at the center of the vortex helps to mask the pungent Japanese postwar "odor" with the "fragrance" of catholic existential inspections of humanity. This practice is coined by Koichi Iwabuchi as *mukokuseki* (English: without nationality). *Mukokuseki* is a practice in media production of removing unwanted Japanese odor to ensure cross-cultural translatability, international marketability, and smooth localization. Koichi Iwabuchi maintains that *Mukokuseki* has twofold

meanings, "to suggest the mixing of elements of multiple cultural origins and to imply the erasure of visible ethnic and cultural characteristics" (Iwabuchi 2002, 71). Such erasure of Japanese identity is charged with the desire to sanitize Japan's global identity,

> It (mukokuseki) is strongly overdetermined by Japan's imperialist history and intertwined with its postcolonial desire for "Asia." The nationalist discourse in this case disregards the complexity inherent in transnational cultural flows and consumption by claiming a likable modern "Japaneseness" in mukokuseki cultural forms (this time, in the sense of "culturally hybridized" forms set against "traditional" ones). Here, the transnationalization of Japanese popular culture has not simply regenerated a conception of Japan's leading position in Asia, it is also conveniently regarded as helping Japan suppress and overcome its historically constituted, problematic, and uneven relationship with other Asian nations. In sum, the transnational intersects with the postcolonial under the influence of the media globalization process (Iwabuchi 2002, 52-3).

Automata, as an odorless cultural artifact, reserves its Japaneseness for its assumed Japanese audience. Yokō engages with *mukokuseki* by removing obvious Japanese signifiers while deliberately signaling Western philosophies. In other words, the game is not odorless but distinctively fragrant to those who have already attuned to it. Japan's ambivalent postwar positionality is illustrated throughout *Automata*, not only in its use of repetitions of gameplay loops but also in the empty space that is not explicitly addressed. While such an open structure is helpful for players to generate meaningful experiences of their own, it also introduces certain unfortunate implications. For instance, one of the major machine lifeforms I have not discussed is a parody of Simone de Beauvoir. Simone, the machine lifeform, falls for the machine lifeform Jean-Paul and yearns for his gaze. Unable to get his attention, Simone "becomes" feminine by adorning herself with traditionally feminine signifiers. While a feminist discourse is established in this narrative, femininity becomes allegorical to subalternity. *Automata*'s Simone parodies feminism as an instance of postcoloniality meanwhile neglecting the ontology of feminist discourse.

Another concern is the sanitation of postwar rhetoric. In *Automata,* Japan's postwar double consciousness engages the victimizer/victim dialectic narcissistically and produces a type of pacifism that characterized by cognitive dissonance. Melancholia offers insight into how pacifism

is formulated through victimhood and trauma, or in other words, a coping mechanism. Colonial desire is, however, situated as an ancestral legacy or filial piety. The inability to sublimate such desire, on the individual level, manifests into melancholic mania as exemplified by machine lifeforms descending into violence after the failure of assimilating human philosophies. The product of such engagement, though becomes pacifist and altruistic at the end, remains uncritical of Japan's colonial past. If Urashima Tarō is punished by opening the box, what would the moral lesson be in *Automata*? What is in the box can be thought of as the suppressed colonial desire in Japan's postwar modernity. Opening the box and inviting the white smoke of the colonial past back into the public consciousness will result in disastrous eventualities. Such a rationale creates a solution that prioritizes suppression over acknowledgment. Just like the Japanese textbook, which warns about the danger of the past through the tale of Urashima Tarō while removing details of Japan's WWII transgressions, *Automata* work through Japan's postwar double consciousness in a defensive manner.

That said, I believe reading certain Japanese video games through the frame of postcolonialism will provide historic and cultural specificities that are often taken out in examining video games as cultural artifacts. I am not proposing to impose a postcolonialist frame on any game that is made in Japan or by Japanese artists. Rather, treating video games as cultural artifacts and contextualizing them with cultural specificity can yield a greater understanding of its cultural importance. In this vein, postcolonialist studies provides a generative framework in understanding what is prioritized and what is deemphasized in face of the increasingly globalized gaming industry.

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