

The Disrupted Ludic Self: Aesthetics of character switching in *NeiR: Automata*

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ABSTRACT

NeiR: Automata (2017) (henceforth *N:A*) is an action-RPG set in a post-apocalyptic Earth where a proxy war between genocidal machines and anthropomorphic androids has overrun the planet. The plot follows the experience of three androids named 2B, 9S, and A2, who were built as humanity's last line of defense against the machines. Upon initial completion of the plot playing as protagonist 2B, the credits roll, but then a menu appears suggesting that the game is not over. Continuing onward, players find themselves unexpectedly replaying the events of the game while playing as deuteragonist 9S; complicating plot points originally seen through 2B's eyes. From this point on, players are periodically forced into playing as different characters to complete the game—including enemy machines and antagonist android A2.

In recent years, *N:A* has been examined as a rich site for game analysis. Since *N:A*'s release, research has examined its player's conflicted ethical positioning (Jačević 2017), its withholding of closure by extending play past its many mock 'endings' (Backe 2018), and its frequent changes to controls that defy simple genre classification (Gerrish 2018). This paper continues this trend of study by investigating the game's changes in player-controlled characters, aiming to answer the following research question:

How do the forced changes between playable characters in N:A alter my relation to its world?

Though the above-cited research has discussed *N:A*'s character switches, the specific effects of these shifts have yet to be examined. Meanwhile, other scholars have outlined the significance of narrative perspective in videogames (Thon 2009; Sharp 2014), of shifts in diegetic perspective (Arjoranta 2017) and "points of action" (Neitzel 2007), the structures of agency that undergird player-avatar relationships and "hybrid identities" (Boudreau 2012; Banks, 2015), and in changes to control of player-characters (Klevjer 2006, 88; Habel & Kooyman 2014; Linderroth 2013, 9; Willumsen 2018). However, I have not found research to date that synthesizes these perspectives to examine the aesthetic effects of sudden player-character switching in digital games—a motif that exists in several games beyond *N:A*, such as *Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty* (2001), *Darkwood* (2014), and (more recently and infamously) *The Last of Us: Part II* (2020).

I aim to fill this gap by examining *N:A*'s changes between characters through the lens of ludic subjectivity put forward by Daniel Vella (Vella 2015). In place of concepts like "player-character" or "avatar," I adopt Vella's notion of the *playable figure*—a

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concurrent formal game component that affords navigability in virtual environments, *and* a character with a distinct diegetic role (Vella, et al. 2019). I similarly adopt his framing of the *gameworld* as the phenomenological, aesthetic form that emerges out of play (Fink, et al. 1968; Gadamer 1975, 106-124) in the fixed parameters of a “figure game’s” (Vella 2015, 13) virtual environment. I argue that this framework of ludic subjectivity can be used as a heuristic to offer a specific analysis of forced character switching in *N:A*, which future research might adopt for analysis of similar figure games. This investigation aims to productively build on prior calls to examine *N:A*’s use of “cognitive dissonance” (Backe 2018) and “defamiliarization” (Gerrish 2018) techniques.

Adopting Vella’s perspective, my research question can be reformulated more precisely as:

How do forced changes of playable figure (across domains of ‘avatar functionality’ and ‘role’) in N:A alter my relation to its gameworld?

The word “forced” in this problem formulation aims to distinguish between changes a player might make to their playable figure’s functionality (e.g. adding an upgrade component to their avatar) or elective changes in playable figure (e.g. selecting to play as 9S or A2 from a menu toward the end of the game). As such, the effects of such voluntary changes fall outside the scope of this study. For short, I call these involuntary changes in playable figure “figure shifts.”

This interpretation of *N:A* contrasts three figure shifts:

- The shift from playing as 2B to playing as a little machine tending to his fallen brother after the first ‘mock ending’
- The shift from playing as 9S to playing as the pacifist machine, Pascal
- The rapid shifts back and forth between A2 and 9S during *N:A*’s penultimate fight

I argue that applying Vella’s theory of ludic subjecthood to these shifts not only explicates what “meaning effects” (Arjoranta 2017) the player can experience from them, but also productively broadens part of his model defining subject positions in figure games. I classify these figure shifts as “objective relation[s] of self”—where the player perceives “an objectified representation of her own ludic subjectivity” (Vella 2015, 241). Vella’s initial formulation of the objective relation of self is limited to textual representations of player behavior, such as *Bastion*’s (2011) narrator who comments on optional, frivolous violence the player performs with the line, “Kid just rages for a while” (Vella 2015, 356-363). I argue that the moment of self-recognition after a figure shift is the moment the player adopts a new ludic subject position, and sees herself in a new entity from the same subject-position Vella describes: “an external perspective, but nonetheless relates to it as ‘herself’” (Ibid., 241).

Continuing a practice set by Vella and Stephan Günzel of borrowing language from cognitive science to describe a viewing of self as “autoscopy” (Günzel 2013; Mishara 2009), I argue that these examples comprise what we might call a *disrupted ludic self*; a meaning effect describing a moment of pause or surprise in a videogame where my new-found ludic self initially comes into view. As in Vella’s original formulation, the disrupted ludic self concept does not attempt to argue that such effects *must* be experienced by every empirical player, but merely describes an encouraged positioning of the “implied player” (Aarseth 2014).

The three figure shifts I have selected as case studies emphasize different meaning effects in these moments of self-recognition:

- *Bringing the body into view*—where my newfound movement and affordances toward the gameworld as a little machine are foregrounded; as informed by Linderoth’s application of ecological psychological affordances to videogames (Linderoth 2013).
- *Bringing my role into view*—where I move from recognizing Pascal as a pre-established character (an “avatar-as-other relationship” or an “objective relation of other”) (Banks 2015; Vella 2015, 235) to suddenly recognizing his movements as my own.
- *Moving from disrupted self to adopted self*—where I become habituated and familiarized to such shifting, such that I maintain a coherent sense of plural ludic selves (‘I am 9S and A2’) in the throws of recurring figure shifts (more akin to an “avatar-as-symbiote relationship” or a “subjective relation of self”) (Banks 2015; Vella 2015, 233).

This study looks to a single videogame example to put forward the disrupted ludic self, and its effects. As such, further research is required to identify the role of figure shifting in structurally different videogames. Nonetheless, I argue that this framing of figure shifting in *N:A* provides an initial ground for analysis of other figure games that rely on similar forced figure shifting.

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