Honors Senior Thesis

2B or Not 2B Alone: The Psychology of Parasocial Interaction in *NieR: Automata*

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Abstract

Parasocial relationships are one-sided emotional bonds that form between individuals and media figures. (Horton and Wohl, 1956). In this paper, I examine *NieR: Automata,* a Japanese Role-Playing Game released in 2017, with respect to the development of parasociality using a three-layered analysis shown in three stages: in-game character attachments, parasocial engagement in fandom spaces, and a parasocial shift to creators and voice actors. Through this analysis, I utilize *NieR: Automata* as a case study to illustrate how interactive media, such as video games, can facilitate parasocial bonds.

Keywords: Psychology, Parasocial Relationships, Video Games, NieR: Automata

2B or Not 2B Alone: The Psychology of Parasocial Interaction in *NieR: Automata*

Parasocial relationships are one-sided emotional bonds that form between individuals and media figures. This term was first coined by Horton and Wohl in 1956, and they describe how individuals perceive media personas, such as television hosts, as intimate partners despite lacking reciprocity. While early research focused on television and celebrity culture, there has been a rise in exploring this phenomenon in the digital media space, such as video games (Lewis et al., 2008). This attention is understandable, given that it is predicted that there will be 3.3 billion gamers by 2024 (Niu et al., 2022). The unique interactive form of video games offers unique conditions for parasocial phenomena to emerge, as video games can create more profound and multi-dimensional opportunities for parasocial experiences than traditional media.

NieR: Automata, a Japanese Role-Playing Game released in 2017, developed by PlatinumGames and published by Square Enix, has garnered widespread critical acclaim and captivates players with its thought-provoking storyline, exploring themes of love, loss, and existentialism in a post-apocalyptic setting (Sullivan, 2017). The primary goal of this paper is to explore *NieR: Automata* and how it can foster parasocial relationships through its emotionally driven gameplay and narrative structure with its characters. In doing so, I aim to offer unique insight into how video games, specifically Japanese role-playing games, can facilitate parasocial bonds. This paper will contribute to the growing research studies on parasocial relationships in video games (Elvery 2023; Gong & Huang, 2022; Feng, 2024) by considering three layers of parasocial experiences: in-game character attachments, parasocial engagement in fandom spaces, and a parasocial shift to creators and voice actors. With the rise of gaming and online spaces, this paper will add to past research demonstrating how video games have become a part of our culture and how games that foster emotionally charged reactions from its players can cultivate

parasocial relationships in ways that differ from traditional media such as television, radio, and celebrities.

Literature Review

Parasocial Relationships and Interactions

Parasocial relationships (PSRs) were first conceptualized by Horton and Wohl in 1956, explaining that PSRs are one-sided emotional attachments formed with media figures who do not reciprocate. While the concept of PSR originally referred exclusively to television and radio personalities, researchers have expanded its use to encompass all sorts of people, ranging from fictional characters to celebrities, with an increase in interactive and immersive media (Lewis et al., 2008; Russell et al., 2003). Video games are unique in that, unlike traditional media, the player constantly observes and interacts with characters, often within dynamic narratives.

Parasocial phenomena encompass parasocial interactions (PSIs) and parasocial relationships. PSIs are defined as interactions that occur during media consumption, and PSRs describe interactions that move beyond media consumption (Libers & Schramm, 2019). Researchers such as Gilies (2002) have further distinguished various orders of parasocial interaction, such as describing the relationship between media users and media figures, from celebrities to fictional characters. Giles outlined three different orders of PSI, depending on the target. First-order PSI is described as media figures who project a familiar persona. Second-order PSI refers to the representation of fictional characters played by actors. Subsequently, third-order PSI describes fantasy/cartoon figures with no real-life counterpart. As will be described below, the ones that will be present in *NieR: Automata* are both second-order PSI and third-order PSI (Giles, 2002). Although Giles argues that the strongest interaction is first-order PSI and becomes

stronger or weaker according to the authenticity or realism of the person's representation, video games offer unique levels of engagement to strengthen second and third-order PSI.

Parasocial Relationships in Video Games

Parasocial relationships have been heavily studied in traditional media (Russell et al., 2003), but research on video games remains limited. Previous research on video game PSRs has often focused on romantic simulation games, female players, and Asian gaming culture (Gong & Huang, 2022; Feng, 2024). More extensive research is thus needed in this area, as video games can create favorable conditions for parasocial interaction to thrive due to the interactive nature of video games and the agency that players have within a narrative (Gong & Huang, 2022). As Elvery (2023) observed in the game *Undertale*, emotional investment with complex characters, such as non-playable characters, can lead to stronger parasocial bonds as narrative-driven games invite players to experience a wide range of complex emotions, such as guilt, grief, and hope, alongside these characters.

Parasocial relationships in video games can also fulfill emotional and psychological needs, but may also contribute to problematic gaming behavior. Niu et al. (2022) conducted a study analyzing video game addiction and its prevalence during the COVID-19 pandemic. They found that many functions in video games could meet the player's needs, such as entertainment and interpersonal interaction. However, they also found that parasocial relationships may increase the risk of video game addiction, as the human brain is believed to have difficulties distinguishing between genuine interpersonal relationships and parasocial relationships (Niu et al., 2022).

Romantic parasocial relationships in video games can be meaningful to adolescents, which can offer a safe space for players to explore emotional intimacy without the fear of being

rejected by another person. These romantic PSRs also provide emotional rewards such as reduced loneliness and an improved self-concept (Feng, 2024)

Parasocial Interaction Development in *NieR: Automata*

Parasocial interaction in *NieR: Automata* happens through a layered process. The game requires players to replay the story five times to experience the whole story from multiple characters' perspectives, providing a unique opportunity to look into how this feature of *NieR: Automata* can contribute to the game's narrative and how it can reinforce parasocial bonds with the game's characters. In this paper, I use *NieR: Automata* to examine the development of parasociality using a three-layered analysis shown in three stages: in-game character attachments, parasocial engagement in fandom spaces, and a parasocial shift to creators and voice actors. Through this, *NieR: Automata* shows how interactive media, such as video games, facilitate parasocial bonds.

Story of *NieR: Automata*

Nier: Automata is set in a post-apocalyptic future on Earth after humanity fled to the moon after an alien invasion. To take back Earth, an elite team of androids called YoRHa is created to help fight the battle against the alien forces of machines. The android 2B's mission is to defeat a Goliath machine. Her entire squadron is shot out of the air, leaving her the lone survivor of the unit. Another android, 9S, a scanner model, meets her at an abandoned factory, and tells her that he will be providing her reconnaissance during her mission. They are also supported by their respective Pods, which are tactical support units assigned to YoRHa soldiers.

They soon encounter two human-machine lifeforms, birthed by the machines called Adam and Eve. These two quickly become the leaders of the machine lifeforms, stating that their next intention is to wipe out humanity.

While on their mission, 2B and 9S meet A2, a rogue YoRHa android wanted for being a fugitive. After a heated battle, she escapes.

9S discovers files related to Project Gestalt, a failed initiative, which wiped out all of humanity with it. Everything that the YoRHa have been fighting for is a complete lie. Project YoRHa was launched to keep android morale from sinking. By believing this lie, androids would feel that they still had a purpose and something to fight and live for.

A2 and 9S engage in a final battle, where the game splits into two parts: choosing A2 or 9S's side. A2 reveals to 9S that 2B was a special android unit called 2E, designed to execute YoRHa units specifically, and that 2B hated killing 9S repeatedly. Enraged by A2's words, 9S tells his pod to stop talking until he or A2 dies.

Unlocking both endings, Pods 042 and 153 defy their orders to delete YoRHa's data. Despite the possibility that 2B, 9S, and A2 will repeat events, the Pods have faith they will forge a new future for themselves. The player can then sacrifice their save data to help other players.

Stage 1: Attachment Within the Game World

The initial stage of PSI occurs during the player's gameplay and engagement with *NieR: Automata*'s characters, specifically the androids named 2B, 9S, and A2. Players strongly identify with video game characters, and this intensifies when players experience agency and emotional investment (Ferchaud, 2024). *NieR* amplifies this through its branching endings and perspective twists that reframe the players' understanding of the world and the characters over time. In order to get the complete picture, players must play the game through repeated playthroughs and narrative twists revealed by playing through each character's perspective. Throughout this, each player spends considerable time with each character, and players witness their individual emotional vulnerabilities, moral struggles, and existential crises. The narrative structure of *NieR:*

Automata relies on players to be emotionally invested in these characters. 2B's inner conflicts of being unable to show emotion, 9S's descent into grief and rage, and A2's path to redemption as a rogue android are all narratives crafted to make the player feel an array of emotions. In the following paragraphs, I describe how the narrative and perspective of each android can foster parasocial phenomena.

2B's ambiguity strengthens parasocial interactions as players decode subtle signs of her personality beneath her cold and stoic exterior. In Route A, "flowers for m[A]chines", 2B is initially portrayed as a stoic, duty-bound soldier who creates emotional distance between the player and 9S. As the story progresses, we see little cracks in this personality. Parasocial relationships can often be strengthened when players are required to decode a character's emotions, fostering a sense of understanding (Harmann & Goldhoorn, 2011). 2B's mechanical combat and personality drastically differ from small glimpses of gentleness the player sometimes sees. When the player is away from the keyboard, she stands idly, often pets her pod, and hums softly in safe zones. These interactions invite players to read into her behaviors. In the first ending, 9S is critically damaged and requests 2B to kill him, which the player must do by holding the attack button. The scene is silent, with the camera focusing on 2B above 9S's body as she chokes him to death, leaving the player to contemplate and think. In these moments, the player becomes bonded to 2B's grief. *NieR: Automata* forces the player to think about the emotionality of that final moment. Even after the first playthrough, it strains the narrative and later feeds on and festers into 2B's behavior in later routes. 2B whispers, "It always ends like this…" and is a confession directed at the player. Players are not only witnessing her loneliness, they are active participants in it. This moment replicates genuine social interaction by compelling players to engage in direct emotional reciprocity with 2B's internal turmoil (Hartmann &

Goldhoorn, 2011). In addition, players who experience physical presence and self-presence also feel empathy for this moment, as players are reacting to this moment as if it were a real person being killed (Feng, 2024).

9S's emotional openness and expressive personality allow parasocial interaction as the players can easily connect with his character. 9S is introduced at the very beginning of the initial playthrough of the game, being tasked as 2B's partner in exploring what once was Earth. 9S is shown to be a bubbly, loyal companion whose personality shines through his expressive dialogue and emotional warmth, which strongly contrasts with 2B's colder, more mechanical personality. Because his character is so open and expressive, players perceive him as socially present, which fosters parasocial interaction early in the narrative (Banks & Bowman, 2014). In Route B, "or no to [B]e", this bond intensifies as players now have access to 9S's private thoughts and dialogue, which recontextualizes the game from his perspective and, in turn, strengthens parasocial attachment within the player as players witness 9S's emotional unraveling as he spirals into grief and obsession. Players are present for his breakdowns and his initial screams after witnessing 2B's death, all of these mirroring expressions of loss. They witness his anger toward A2, a mystifying and powerful android, and 9S exclaims that he will be the one to kill her. Players watch his delusions about 2B still being alive, 9S questions his romantic and sexual desires toward her. Emotional vulnerability and authenticity increase parasocial desire as 9S's emotional unwinding intensifies players' parasocial bonds (Puvogel, 2023). The parasocial bond with 9S is unique and painful, with the player and his emotional journey tied by heartbreak.

A2, introduced as an antagonist, offers a unique conflicted parasocial dynamic between the player and the character. A2 starts to attack 2B and 9S when they first meet. Her character is morally complex; she is hostile and violent, threatening players' attachment towards 2B and 9S.

However, as players are active participants in her story, they have an opportunity to reframe the understanding of her character. This emotional progression parallels Elvery's (2023) analysis of *Undertale*'s Flowey, a character initially presented as a villain but later revealed to be a profound character overwhelmed with suffering. Elvery argues that this fosters risky parasocial bonds as *Undertale* players feed into the toxic dynamic between Flowey and the player character Chara. A similar dynamic can be seen in *NieR: Automata*, as players are constantly enticed to continue caring about A2 despite the disruption she causes to the lives of 2B and 9S. A2's story illustrates the impact of morally complex characters on parasocial development.

Transactions can also reinforce parasocial relationships in video games. As Blom (2023) describes, players undergo a set of processes to establish relationships. Transactions are character-targeted dialogues, quests, or time-related events that give players items or objects. Blom describes how the game *Persona 5* has a rigid main narrative that the player cannot change, a trait commonly associated with JRPGs, and it is no different in *NieR: Automata*. The system of affection is a secondary mechanic that allows the player to develop parasocial relationships between the player character and NPCs. Players in *NieR: Automata* are given the choice to seek out these parasocial relationships,. For example, the character Jackass is an android, a part of the Resistance against the machines on Earth. During her initial sidequest, Jackass's Research, she asks for help from 2B and 9S as she wants to get more combat data on androids and the effects battling has on them. After this, players will get a message in the mail in which she states that she wants to test mackerel's effect on androids and confirm for herself that it kills androids after consumption. Eating the fish causes 2B to implode and unlocks one of the 26 endings (“aji wo [K]utta”). As Blom says, following *Persona 5*, building these relationships allows the player to build connections between the player character and NPCs. This bond serves

players as Jackass will be unlocked as an NPC that serves the player and a way to easily purchase items they may need. *NieR: Automata* facilitates the experience of parasocial interactions by reframing the understanding of the world and its characters and utilizing mechanics such as transactional quests to help solidify these bonds.

Stage 2: The Influence of Fandom on Parasociality

After players complete *NieR: Automata*, many players seek affinity spaces focused on the game. Fandom spaces, also known as affinity spaces, are loosely organized social and cultural settings in which the work of teaching tends to be shared by many people in many locations connected by a shared interest or passion (Gee, 2007). Affinity spaces allow for further media discussion and creativity to shine, such as fan art and fan fiction. One of these places is Reddit, which hosts various communities also known as subreddits. The subreddit for NieR flaunts 261k members.

Those who have played the game have fostered a deep connection to the world and story, with one Steam review stating, "This is one of the most beautiful experiences in life I've had so far. Literally nothing I've read, watched or played has actually made me cry, truly; but after finishing ending E, I cried, simply for how beautiful this work of art was." Expressions such as "this game changed my life" are a common sentiment shared within the community, showcasing the bond that many players established during their time playing *NieR: Automata*.

One example of parasocial reinforcement happens during Ending E, “the [E]nd of YoRHa,” which relies on community engagement. The end credits become a bullet-hell, killing the player by shooting projectiles. Each checkpoint asks an existential question, and the final question asks, "Give up here?" If the player chooses not to do so, they are offered help from a player. Pod 042 directly addresses the player, asking if they are interested in helping the weak.

By accepting this, players acknowledge that they will be helping someone in the world, but in exchange, players must lose all of their saved data. The pod asks again if the player still wishes to rescue someone despite knowing it will be a stranger, pointing out that it could be a person they would intensely dislike, acknowledging the player's time and achievements in the game, and that they may never be thanked despite their noble sacrifice. Pod 042 harps on the idea that their efforts and achievements in the game will mean nothing if they are sure about their decision. Players who accept all the terms can write their message to the world, all options being affirmative and hopeful. Such as “you’ve got us with you” and “believe in yourself”. Players then sit through watching all their data being erased right in front of their eyes. Players are thanked for their contributions. A bonus cut-scene is also awarded at the end of data deletion. Pod 153 directly addresses the player, reframing 2B’s opening line, “Everything that lives is designed to end. They are perpetually trapped in a never-ending spiral of life and death.” Pod 153 questions whether their memories and data were restored, and with confirmation of this, asks if this will lead to the same conclusion as before. Pod 042 reaffirms that it could be possible, but there is also the chance for a new ending for 2B and 9S. The final shots of this cutscene show 2B and 9S lying motionless beside each other, while A2 is slumped alone on a windowsill. This in-game community is compelling despite its lack of direct interactions. During shooter segments, players can read the notes of past players that are directly communicating with the current player; messages like “you are not alone” and “I'm rooting for you” fill the screen.

Many players sacrificed their save data to help other players who may give up during the credits minigame, and they become helpful for future players. GameFAQs, a website for gaming guides and resources, also has a message board forum. A player said, “I couldn't help but think this the moment I got my final death before the rescue offer. We were 2B, 9S, and A2: androids

pitted against the machines. The only two networks left in the galaxy. But the moment I saw those other players who sacrificed their save data to save my ass and get me through the credits and achieve the true ending... it made me realize that there is a third network: the human network. humanity is not extinct, but alive in us the players. combine that with a multilingual medley of the game's theme, and this had to be the biggest emotional journey of a game I've played in a long time". Feng (2024) explains that players experience physical presence which is how players respond to virtual objects or environments as if they were real and self-presence is the player's in-game self-identity awareness and empathy with the game's characters (Lee, 2004; Park et al., 2010) The emotionality that players have with this ending contributes to how players are internalizing the game and sharing it with communities. Parasocial bonds are apparent; The loss feels authentic and personal, and the intense choice to delete a save file, which contains hours and hours of progress, relies on the parasocial bonds players have created with 2B, 9S, and A2. Players making their decisions out of empathy feels like a final act of saving and care. With this community outreach, players are reaching out to each other to show how they feel the same.

The influences of fandom and parasocial interaction can further influence purchasing intentions. Gong and Huang (2022) found that with parasocial interactions in romantic video games and female players, strong parasocial attachments strongly influenced purchasing intentions within the media. This research can be applied to emotionally charged games such as *NieR: Automata*, where players also form deep bonds with characters, and these attachments can live on through much of the media that *NieR* puts out, including various novels, drama CDs, figurines, and live concerts, all of which expand the emotional and narrative world of the game. *NieR: Automata* is unique as this media often offers additional lore and character development that is inaccessible through the game alone, leading players to seek out others for interpretations

and discussions. O'Donovan (2016) conducted a study that found that fandom activity strengthens parasocial relationships. Participants who engaged with extended media reported feeling emotionally closer to fictional characters. One participant stated, "It makes me feel closer to him, I've learned so much about him and that makes me feel like I know him" (p.56). Within *NieR's* fandom, this can be seen as fans gathering in places like Reddit to piece together lore and narrative events or to talk about the characters, suggesting that parasocial interactions in video games are sustained not only by purchasing behaviors post-game but can also be intensified through fandom spaces where attachments are shared, validated, and deepened.

NieR: Automata demonstrates how parasocial interaction can extend beyond the game through fandom. After completing NieR, players continue engaging through fandom spaces where discussions of the game and various types of content, such as characters and lore, help build on pre-existing relationships with the characters.

Stage 3: Parasocial Shift to Creators

As some players move beyond gameplay and fandom, the parasocial interaction shifts from the game's fictional characters to the people behind its creation. Yoko Taro is the eccentric video game director behind *NieR: Automata*, who hides his face behind his iconic Emil mask. Emil is a character from his previous game, *NieR: Gestalt/Replicant.* His open use of platforms such as X (formerly known as Twitter) makes him a very appealing public figure to players. Online, he is known for his bizarre humor and self-deprecating tweets, such as in response to someone thanking Yoko Taro for the *NieR* games because if it was not for that, they would have never met their girlfriend, he responds with "Oh no. I don't want to hear this kind of report. I hope that all cool good guys will be vanishing from this planet. Except their girlfriends. I hope so every day."

He also uses his platform to defend the people who enjoy his games, stating, “I’ve always thought that there are way too many people who complain about fan art and cosplay of others. Even if the illustration sucks, or even if the cosplay is completely different from the character, at the very least they still make me happy. These people basically do it because that’s what they like to do, so outsiders should just shut up and stop whining, at least that's what I think.” This blend of mystery and vulnerability may contribute to reinforcing these parasocial relationships. People on places as Reddit have gone on to state how they personally feel about Yoko Taro, with one user responding to being followed back on X and stating “God himself followed me, I'm seriously freaking out”. Another user goes on to self-identify their parasocial relationship with Yoko Taro, “might or might not be projection, but I feel as though Yoko Taro's work truly resonates with me. Yoko Taro, as a person, is relatable (though I've never had the pleasure of meeting them in the flesh). Oops, might be a tad too parasocial”. Parasocial bonds are strengthened when public figures exhibit emotional authenticity and responsiveness. (Puvogel, 2023)

This emotional authenticity and responsiveness (Puvogel, 2023) can be seen in the voices of the actors behind 2B and 9S, Kira Buckland and Kyle McCarley. In an interview with Todas Gamers and Kira Buckland, she reflects deeply on 2B and how she navigated her character. She reflects that players will understand her reasoning for 2B coming across so cold at first, allowing for emotional intimacy by inviting players into the process of the character development behind the scenes. Buckland also states that she is a fan of the pairing between 2B and 9S, stating that “I just love them so much and I want them to be happy,” mirroring a sentiment that some fans have, and going on to note that Kyle McCarley and her often call each other “Toobs” and “Nines,” which goes on to extend the character dynamic from the game into real life. Buckland and

McCarley also hosted live streams of the game which can further reinforce the connection to which Buckland explains that fans "got to see our reactions—laughing and crying along with them" Watching the voice actors respond and play the game in real-time allows for players to re-experience not only the game but watch how the people behind it react to it, allowing for a parasocial relationship to flourish because it replicates the cues of social intimacy. (Puvogel, 2023). One person who met Kira Buckland states their experience as "Kira Buckland is fucking wonderful. She called me pretty and I damn near cried" and another stating "Kira buckland could recite a shampoo bottle for 40 hours and I'd still probably rate it performance of the year tbh". Another commented that they would spend their entire paycheck on Kyle McCarley's signature (Mrbcraft, 2023). Since both Kira Buckland and Kyle McCarley are public figures who are well known in the gaming space, the way that they exhibit emotional authenticity and responsiveness to their fans allows for these parasocial relationships to form. (Puvogel, 2023)

Players participating in activities such as watching interviews, attending convention panels, or following creators online feel emotionally closer to the people behind their favorite media. (O'Donovan, 2016) This participation can be strong in *NieR: Automata*, where players are encouraged to form attachments to the characters with its emotionally charged narrative, which can extend to the creators, especially if they engage in fan culture. Parasocial interactions feel reciprocated, although no direct interaction occurs. Parasocial relationships in this context serve as social surrogates, substitutes for real-life connections due to isolation, most commonly seen during the COVID-19 pandemic (Niu et al., 2022). Players turn to the following accessible figure to maintain the parasocial relationship developed throughout the game.

NieR: Automata demonstrates how parasociality can move beyond the game and fandom and blend into the many creators behind the game as players feel interconnected with these media figures.

Limitations and Further Research

Although *NieR: Automata* provides a unique example of how parasocial interaction can happen through interactive media, it is limited as it is a focused case study on one game in the Japanese role-playing game genre. Further research is needed to examine this pattern throughout other game genres (Action, Simulation, Survival, etc.) and platforms. Investigating how players interact with their games (controller vs. keyboard) may be an interesting direction to explore how these small details can change how a player responds to a game. Another thing to note is the intended audience for games; *NieR: Automata* is designed to be played by mature audiences seventeen and up, according to the Entertainment Software Rating Board. In addition, most available research centers on dating games and female players based in Asian gaming culture research; using a broader demographic could help understand how parasocial relationships can develop across different identities, player ages, and cultures. A longitudinal study could also be beneficial as it can explore how parasocial relationships and interactions can evolve, such as a player returning to a game, and how involved they are in fan culture. In addition, examining game series such as *NieR: Automata*, which has multiple games that interconnect together, presents a higher chance for developing parasocial interaction and relationships for players.

Conclusion

NieR: Automata demonstrates how parasocial interaction and relationships can flourish through a layered process. Using in-game character attachments, parasocial engagement in fandom spaces, and a parasocial shift to creators captures how powerful interactive media such

as video games can be. The unique game design of making players replay the game at least five times to get the whole story, which can take up to twenty-one hours (according to How Long To Beat), facilitates the development of these connections. Witnessing the game from multiple characters' perspectives allows players to foster a parasocial emotional attachment. Fandom culture also feeds into this cycle, where discussions and various types of available external content can deepen the bonds formed during gameplay, with the open presence of creators like Yoko Taro, Kira Buckland, and Kyle McCarley allowing for parasocial attachment to extend beyond the game into real life. Interactive video games such as *NieR: Automata* offer unique conditions for parasocial phenomena to emerge and can create more intense and multi-dimensional opportunities for parasocial experiences than traditional media.

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