

The Appropriation Art of Pandora's Image in Retro-Futuristic Video Games

Abstract:

Pandora is not an obsolete image. This mythical image, regarded as the first artificial woman, is readapted into the robotic form in modern sci-fi film as a curvaceous figure with a fully covered metallic surface wearing an obscure face. The debut of this cyborg Pandora is in Fritz Lang's sci-fi film *Metropolis* (1927), where Maria in her first presentation is in startling resemblance with the scene of the making of Pandora on the 5th century BC Greek vases by the Niobid Painter. They both stand face in full-frontal view and seem lifeless and mindless, grooming and waiting for the animation. Mayor compares this ancient myth with modern reception and points out that "the age-old opposition of human versus machine continues to exert an edgy pushpull response, trepidation commingled with fascination and awe." (2018, 169)

This influential image of the cyborg Pandora has recurred in contemporary painting and sculpture, and current video games. This paper will explore the remaking of the mythical Pandora as the stylish female robot, which was initiated in *Metropolis*, adapted in Hajime Sorayama's painting, sculpture, and installation series of *Sexy Robot* since the 1980s, and recently borrowed by video games *Atomic Heart* (Mundfish, 2023) and *Reverse 1999* (Bluepoch, 2023). The portrayal of a metallic-skinned and anatomically arresting gynoid has been repeatedly represented under several aliases, Maria, Sexy Robot, The Twins, and Lucy (the new character Lucy was released on September 2024 in version 1.9). And the visual lineage of playing with a digital memory of gynoids can be manifested evidently.

The reusing of this cyborg Pandora's image is almost comparable to how Marcel Duchamp adopted a urinal in 1917, and in 1991, Sherrie Levine readopted Duchamp's urinal as *Fountain (After Marcel Duchamp)*. Appropriation art in modern and contemporary art history signified how artists were questioning "the nature or definition of art" (Tate), by "intentional borrowing, copying, and alteration of existing images and objects" (MoMA). Although the cultural and legal senses criticise the problematic authenticity, originality, authorship and copyright issues around appropriation, however, artistic appropriation conceptually challenged the pre-existed ideas and systems. The readymade, the familiar image, when removed to a different context, must be

deciphered accordingly.

This paper will employ the theoretical frame of appropriation art to analyse how these two games adapt the digital memories and emotions of the cyborg Pandora via narrative, mechanics, and gameplay. In this sense, what is the specific game world that the gynoid is reimagined? How does this worldbuilding question the definition of the cyborg Pandora in beauty and danger? And to what extent, has the game world reinforced or challenged the stereotyped conception of feminine robots in sensuality, objectification, and techno-anxieties, in its recontextualisation and players' interactive experience?

Previous debates on cyborg women in technologies (Balsamo, 1995) and other theories of Cyberfeminism, Technofeminism, and Xenofeminism have provided a critical lens to review the relationship between gender and technology. This paper will emphasise how the gameplay and game world act as the experimental space to deliver the potentiality in speculation. And the argument will continue that by retelling the mythical image of Pandora in the cyborg form these games are making techno-cultural commentaries on the long lingering tension between humans and machines. The game world is moderately inviting players to provoke thoughts and discussions about what means to be a cyborg Pandora in the postmodern era. Since we are now all human cyborgs in Haraway's opinion (1991), what could be the future ethics of human-robot relations, while we are towards a near future of human-machine complex, human and machine in co-existence?

Keywords:

Mythmaking, Worldbuilding, Play, Cyborg Women, Posthuman, Speculation

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Author's Statement:

Yifan WANG researches and curates. She is currently a research assistant at the Research Institute for Digital Culture and Humanities (RIDCH), Hong Kong Metropolitan University, under projects of Chinese mythology and sci-fi in the digital age, working on AI-generated Chinese mythical creatures and digital archiving mythological receptions. She read Classics at Durham University and Art History at Glasgow University. Her curatorial experience is in textile art, fibre art, unwearable fashion art, and handicraft technique. Her research interests include classical reception in contemporary art, symbolism between in-game worldbuilding and ancient mythmaking, the reflective interplay between artistic craftsmanship and the Platonic Demiurge, and cosmological mystery between imitation and creation. A recent chapter is “Spatiality and Visuality of Mythical Objects: Remaking Chinese Myths in Digital Culture” in *The Myriad Faces of Heroes and Heroines: Folkloric Tradition and Modern Contemporaries in Asia* (Springer, 2025); a paper presentation in *Antiquity in Media Studies 2024 Conference*.

Spirit of Fire: False endings and the search for gnosis in *NieR: Automata*

The 2017 action-RPG *NieR: Automata* (PlatinumGames, 2017), directed by Yoko Taro, is set in a post-apocalyptic world where humans are absent and ‘androids’ are waging a war on their behalf against alien-created ‘machines’. The game is particularly notable for its themes including a search for meaning, secrecy, sacrifice, violence and trauma, and religion. In an upcoming book chapter, I explore the ways that temporality, difference, and repetition are employed in *NieR: Automata* to form a gothic narrative (Tomkinson, 2025). A significant aspect of this, and one that I would like to explore further, is the use of repeat playthroughs and multiple ‘endings’ to reach the truth. The game has 26 endings in total, although A, B, C, D, and E are those the progress the game; the others are ‘dead ends’. The ‘endings’, then, challenge the finality of an ending and the idea of when an ending should occur.

I am not the first to note the interesting way that multiple playthroughs are implemented in *NieR: Automata*. Paquet (2021, p. 113) describes how the game challenges typical understandings of time and endings through its narrative, which is intertwined with the game’s mechanics. Reflecting on the demands of Ending E, Paquet also notes that *NieR: Automata* points towards the importance of the collective, in particular an ‘automata collective’ – one that operates without the need for the original contributor (Despain & Acosta, 2013, Chapter 1). Scholars have also reflected on how the game explores the death of god and search for purpose (Seregni & Toniolo, 2023), as well as sacrifice, spiritual journeys, spiritual independence, and cyclical struggles (Stevenson, 2023).

All of these analyses of *NieR: Automata* indicate that it is what Jeff Howard calls an occult game – one that facilitates a “transformative experience for the player, in which a seemingly ordinary game is revealed to have concealed thematic depth the entire time” (Despain & Acosta, 2013, Chapter 1). What stands out to me in these works is the way that the search for spiritual truth occurs through repeated journeys of sacrifice, suffering, and meaning-making, akin to a search for *gnosis*. With each playthrough and each false ending, the player and characters gain more knowledge, perspectives, and understandings. Eventually, they gain the forbidden information that the humans are dead and that the war is essentially meaningless. The android protagonists ultimately fight for their redemption, for their right to live, in an incredibly moving, innovative, fourth-wall-breaking final battle that facilitates an experience of the sublime. In this presentation I will explore *NieR: Automata*’s narrative structure, specifically with its multiple false endings and cumulation in a revelation of a fundamental truth, as a spiritual search for *gnosis*.

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Bio

Sian Tomkinson is an independent researcher based in Perth, Western Australia. Her core research focus revolves around player engagement with video games and communities of play. Much of Sian's work uses Deleuzoguattarian concepts to examine the role gender plays in game cultures and communities. Sian is working on projects including why players enjoy certain games and what impact these games have on attitudes and behaviours; the economics of game production; how game design can impact communities of play, and how social media communities regulate toxic gamer behaviour. Sian's work has been published in *Games and Culture*, *The Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds*, *Gamevironments*, and *Continuum*, among others. Her upcoming book unpacks why stereotypical assumptions about gender pervade the video game industry and communities of play, leading to toxic attitudes and events such as Gamergate and beyond.

Adapting the 3/11 Disaster: Reconstructing Sensory Order and Ontological Security in Disaster Report 4: Summer Memories

Contextualized by the Great East Japan Disaster (hereafter the 3/11 disaster), this study employs a sensory anthropological perspective to analyze Disaster Report 4: Summer Memories. It analyzes how the game adapts the sensory order of the actual disaster, integrating these shifts between order and disorder into its narrative and gameplay mechanics, as well as how existing narratives and transmedia or multiplatform storytelling can be adapted to present survival challenges to allow players to experience sensory disruption, the fracturing of ontological security, and their rebuilding—reflecting the lived realities of disaster survivors.

The unprecedented 3/11 disaster, characterized as Japan's "Black Swan" (Bestor, 2013), profoundly reshaped Japanese society. The resulting Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster compounded the devastation, causing widespread displacement and long-lasting consequences. Its far-reaching impacts extended to many sectors, including video games. As Muriel and Crawford (2018) observe, video games are "established cultural products" that reflect social experiences (p.3), in the wake of the disaster, the video game industry became a powerful vehicle for processing collective trauma and social change, as games, through their adaptation of emotion and personal experience, engage players in a variety of modalities such as audio, visual, and haptic cues that are filtered through the player's senses and cognitive perception. Existing studies, however, have largely concentrated on the use of serious games in disaster preparedness education, such as the development of a Shelter Simulation Serious Game for Disaster Education (Hazeyama et al., 2024) or the utilization of game events to support disaster-affected areas and cultivate understanding of disabilities (Araya, 2024); whereas literature into post-disaster contexts remains limited, despite entertainment games also acting a crucial role in post-disaster societies, exemplified by the Disaster Report series. Whaley (2019) explored the first video game in this series, and argued that its "limited engagement" design communicates the vulnerability of survivors and the significance of individual agency. The game further challenges official narratives by incorporating marginalized perspectives, thereby enriching representations of disaster.

Building on this foundation, this study explores the most recent installment in the series, Disaster Report 4: Summer Memories, originally slated for release on March 10, 2011, mere one day prior to the 3/11 disaster. The game constructs a virtual environment depicting the chaotic and ordered aspects of post-disaster society, affording players a unique vantage point from which to explore sensory and psychological recovery in a post-disaster setting.

Drawing upon Vannini, Waskul, and Gottschalk's (2012) sensory order theory, as cited in Low (2023), the game affords players an experience of sensory disorder across three dimensions: intensity, context, and aesthetics/morality. In terms of intensity, the game amplifies sensory input through depictions of collapsed buildings, NPC deaths, and war-like scene designs, producing overwhelmingly stimulating experiences, notably impactful visuals and low-frequency sound. Contextually, the scarcity of water

takes on symbolic significance in the disaster setting, where sheltered survivors lose gustatory and pain perception, and hold a belief that ordinary water has curative properties. Ethically, the game challenges players' moral sensibilities through the depicted financial practices of players and NPCs. These design choices disrupt players' cognitive stability, aligning with Giddens' theory of ontological security by illustrating the erosion of subjective security in the face of sensory disorder.

Secondly, the game incorporates a novel "elimination needs" mechanic, enabling players to re-establish a sense of order amid sensory disruption. Elimination, as a familiar, habitual, and predictable daily function, allows players to reclaim a degree of control over their bodies and surroundings. As Mitzen observes, "Routines keep ontological fears out of discursive consciousness. By exposing ontological insecurity, trauma highlights how deeply individuals rely on routines." (2006, p. 348) Moreover, this mechanic subtly alludes to the real-world sanitation crises that arose during the 3/11 disaster earthquake, such as the shortage of toilet facilities and the rise in infectious disease transmission, as illustrated by the increased infection rates among those seeking refuge in shelters (Hasegawa et al., 2014). This incorporation of real-world challenges into the game's narrative enhances players' understanding of post-disaster conditions.

Finally, the game's design of aftershocks illustrates the notion, as described by Low (2023, p. 159), that "paradoxically, some semblance of predictability and routine can be realised from sensory disorder and extreme sense scapes, even if latently manifested." While earthquakes violently disrupt players' sensory order, the recurring aftershocks become somewhat predictable through precursory sensory cues, such as the shaking of objects and specific sound effects.

Through an integrated analysis of sensory anthropology, narrative structure, and game mechanics, this study illustrates how *Disaster Report 4: Summer Memories* negotiates the balance between entertainment and critical reflection on real-world disasters.

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I am a second-year master's student in Japanese Language and Literature at Shanghai Jiao Tong University, and now an exchange student at the Laboratory of Visual and Modern Culture at Hokkaido University. My research interests mainly focus on the "Post-3.11", exploring cultural and narrative responses to the Great East Japan Disaster through literary works, films, video games and other forms. For example, during my undergraduate studies, I explored Makoto Shinkai's anime movies. Driven by my academic background and personal interest in video games, I chose to analyze Disaster Report 4: Summer Memories for this project. This research reflects my aspiration to engage with interdisciplinary challenges and contribute to a deeper understanding of disaster narratives through interactive media.