

### Anti-Essentialist Concepts of Art in *NieR: Automata*

Art is a large and ambiguous sphere whose definition or thereby attempts at defining make it really intractable. The difficulty of such a task generates very interesting debate of how art should be defined. Part of the problem is that art may appear as uncommon mediums, such as fictional entertainment. *NieR: Automata* is one such medium that by thematic depth is exemplary of anti-essentialist concepts of art, and thus provides criticism of art in itself.

To understand how difficult defining art is, here is an illustrative example of the problem of defining art. Suppose an alien with the same consciousness as mankind had suddenly travelled to a blue marble of a planet (hint: Earth) and land in some sort of contemporary civilisation. The alien then walks inside a bakery and sees fifty identical gingerbread men lined up. The alien begins to wonder: how could fifty gingerbread men be identical to each other? If you were a human, the answer is quite simple: The baker had used a cookie cutter. Of course, upon closer inspection, the alien sees that there are some gingerbread men with bumps or individual pores, some are deformed on one limb and some are more burnt than the others, and one may even be half-eaten, but the alien still has the basic idea of what a gingerbread man is inside his head. The alien sees the *perfect* gingerbread man in his head, and has knowledge of the cookie cutter without even seeing the cookie cutter itself. This “cookie cutter” is clearer and more perfect than any gingerbread man ever manifested.

Is this alien us? Yes! As the ancient Greek philosopher Plato theorised in his famous “Allegory of the Cave”, concepts are made to be readily referenceable to any object that humans may divy or classify. But, art as a concept is not as clear a concept. What if the alien, or us for that matter, were to see a jumbled metal structure? Framed dribbles of various colours of paint? A black square on a white canvas? Art is one of the allegorical shadows on the cave wall; its crystal-clear figure is fuzzied and silhouetted by the daylight that emanates from the mouth of the cave.

A more literal explanation for this is that a definition for the term for “art” must encompass and compactly hold what any and all art has in common, which seems simple enough, for any series of words can sufficiently describe any practical object of life apart from any other. However, the modern concept of art is something that is not so clear cut.

Until the mid-nineteenth century, art was defined by its historical definition. This was, until modern artworks manifested: surrealist exhibitions such as those found in the Dada Movement, and other art branches of the abstract. In the face of modernism, the world started to search for a new definition of art. In problematisation, “anti-essentialism” is the argument that art cannot be

defined. In its strongest or strictest sense, art cannot be defined through necessary and sufficient conditions. Anti-essentialists argue that the best candidate of a necessary condition of art is artefactuality--or, having qualities of being human-made.

A particular niche-market media work illustrates the problems of this condition of art. It is not the media work in itself that poses an argument to anti-essentialism. It is the narrative and fictional situations within the work that demonstrate to those observant of thereof that such a condition is to be criticised. The niche-market media work in question is *NieR: Automata*, a Japanese action role-playing game set in a fictional Earth in 11945 AD, where only machines made by invasive aliens and androids made by a fleeing mankind roam the Earth. Without physical contact from their respective masters for thousands of years, these puppets must wage an endless war.

As the player assumes the role of an android fighting for humankind, they meet friendly yet tragic characters that defy traditional notions of artificial intelligence, as they display human conditions and emotions. These machines are drama actors that dutifully perform *Romeo and Juliet* until they commit suicide in fiery explosions. They assume the role of paleolithic tribes, with face paints, donning decorative feathers and cloaks. They create depictions and drawings. They are artists entire, but even in the real world our definition of “artist” is muddled and ambiguous. Their art demonstrates all the qualities that art may have, but it is by necessary condition not artefactual, and by effect is not art.

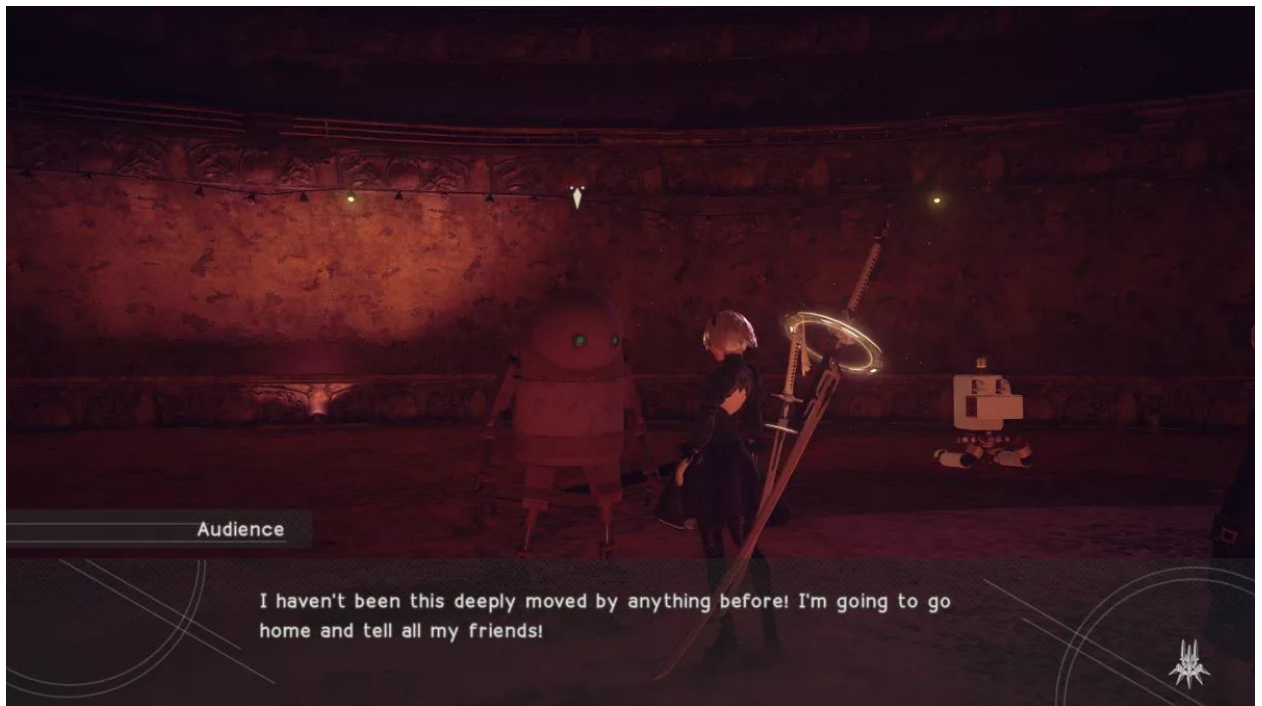
Intelligence must play a role in how non-artefactual art can be genuinely original, or the product of creative genius. How advanced either puppets are is unknown. Both have different methods of sentience. Machines are connected via a network, and furthermore have a core, while androids must check their “consciousness saturation”, and furthermore have “black boxes”. There is a clear division between physical body and a (material) soul. These machines have the necessary organs to conceptualise art. Yet beyond physical properties, it must be the case that art between artificial intelligence and humans are the not product of the same thinking. Humans do not think in terms of 1’s and 0’s, and they constitute their environment and personal characteristics into their unique identities. However, in *NieR: Automata*, artificial intelligence has developed to unique personalities all--products of their nature and nurture. What is more surreal is the fact that the alien-made machines cannot procreate, but many choose to identify as mothers, fathers, and children, and they study, memorise, and read instead of uploading and downloading data. Culture is a reflection innate in society, or characterised by a systemised pattern of behaviour, also demonstrated by these self-sustaining machines and androids.

The anti-essentialist counterexample to such a claim as “art needs to be artefactual” is that even a non-artefact can be art--as convincing as *NieR: Automata* can portray such a case. Yet, the

counterexample itself is controversial. Imagine: to designate anything as art! In drawing conclusions, therefore there is no one necessary condition of art. In its cyclical nature, art cannot be defined.

This counterexample can easily be extended to discuss *NieR: Automata*'s original music score. Composed by famed video game background music composer Keiichi Okabe, it's hauntingly beautiful. It is definitely alien, but altogether familiar. This is because, echoes of instruments are accentuated by an unknown language, an invented language, made my mashing together a multitude of different languages. It is an approach to what languages would evolve into in the year 11945 AD. However, is music that is aesthetically pleasing, but has no definitive purpose, no innate meaning, no communicative extension other than its aural *likeness* to meaningful music, truly, definitively art? This may lead into the "weak" anti-essentialist argument of art being intuitive to humans, but in logical objection, intuitions may not always be reliable.

The conceptualisation of "art" is free of language, but it is rather normative of human cultures regardless, and perhaps also machines, if they are readily self-conscious, self-sustaining, and provided they emerge as a society. The etymological definition of "art" is used to define human-made objects; art made by machines defy this definition, and we can call what these machines have made "art", because everything in the "extension" of art are things that really *are* artworks, the "extension" potentially disjunctive. The concept of machines without a doubt interferes with traditional ideas of sentience, and from the evolutionary basis of machines, they themselves either pose a mirror of the human condition, including its most organic facet, art, or they are as organic as their creators.



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