Final Songs: Music and the Voice in NieR Replicant ver. 1.22474487139...

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This thesis analyzes the soundtrack to the 2021 game *NieR: Replicant Ver. 1.22474487139...*, examining its approach to character leitmotif and the centrality of the voice as an expressive and dramatic layer of the soundtrack. The *NieR* series has received considerable acclaim for its music, with 2017’s *NieR: Automata* gaining widespread critical and commercial success that has led to a wave of scholarly analysis of it. This document analyzes *Replicant*, the previous game in the series, through the experiential framework of a player, highlighting how the game recontextualizes themes through repeated playthroughs, and on the strong link that the soundtrack’s vocals carry with their character counterparts, in the process illustrating the musical voice’s humanizing aspects. The final chapter examines the “Ending E” sequence added in *1.22*, examining how it serves as a microcosmic summation of almost every other musical technique utilized throughout the series.
FINAL SONGS: MUSIC AND THE VOICE IN NIER: REPLICA NT VER. 1.22474487139...

by
Haden Douglass Plouffe

A thesis submitted to the Graduate College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
School of Music
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Haden Plouffe
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INTRODUCTION

The music of Yoko Taro’s game series *NieR* has received widespread acclaim, greatly contributing to the series’ cult following. Composed by Keiichi Okabe and several other Monaca Studio composers, the scores to *NieR: Replicant* and its sequel *NieR: Automata* are striking and instantly recognizable for their centering of vocals, bombastic percussion, and unique handling of leitmotif. *Automata* received additional acclaim from critics and audiences alike for its dynamic soundtrack, where various layers of the background music enter the mix as the game’s plot progresses.

While the first *NieR* was not a critical or commercial darling, its OST (original soundtrack) was nonetheless immensely popular, coming in at 24 on the Oricon Albums Chart.¹ By contrast, 2017’s *NieR: Automata* was a massive commercial success, selling 7.5 million copies as of April 2023, and its soundtrack peaking at number 2 on the OAC.² After *Automata’s* commercial and critical success, scholars including Christopher Greene and Jennifer Smith have analyzed the treatment of leitmotif and the role of the voice in the soundtrack, respectively, with Stefan Greenfield-Casas examining the diegetic voice and its posthumanist implications, and Hayden Harper analyzing the embodiment of gendered musical characteristics in contrast with similar RPGs. Non-musical scholars such as Martyna Pęcak, Leandro Lima, and Dorota Walesa have examined the game from existentialist/absurdist perspectives and tackled the game’s handing of the monstrous/monstrous feminine (respectively), and Alexandre Paquet highlights

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² NieR Series (@NieRGame), “You'll be delighted to hear more than 7.5 million copies,” Twitter, April 24th, 2023, 10:01 AM, [https://twitter.com/NieRGame/status/1650137699280642050?s=20](https://twitter.com/NieRGame/status/1650137699280642050?s=20)
the game’s disruptive approach to traditional narratives as well as its prominent Marxist themes
(most prominently in its final canonical “Ending E”).

As a result of Automata’s popularity, the series is accruing more critical and scholarly analysis, but this has largely ignored the first game in the series, Replicant. With the April 2021 release of NieR Replicant ver. 1.22474487139... (henceforth referred to as 1.22) a “version upgrade” as described by series creator Yoko Taro, the original game has become much more accessible (appearing on major gaming platforms and PC for the first time) as well as featuring new recordings and expansions of the original music, several new tracks for the OST, and cut story content fleshing out the original release, allowing for a more complete picture of the intended narrative.³

It is this 2021 release that I analyze in this thesis, with reference to relevant tracks and story moments from Automata. This thesis’s focus is twofold: An analysis of Replicant’s leitmotifs and their placement in the game’s elaborate narrative structure (involving multiple replays of the same story with increased narrative context in each subsequent playthrough) and examining the significance of the voice in the game’s soundtrack. Vocals play a huge role in Replicant and Automata’s OSTs, and character themes are often linked with the diegetic voices of the character they represent – in some cases blurring the lines of diegesis.

In my analysis, I illustrate the uniqueness of 1.22’s musical storytelling through its limited means – the series only rarely engages in traditional leitmotivic transformation, with the most substantive changes to a given theme typically being tempo-oriented (though the material surrounding a given theme may be radically different). Musical tools found in its contemporaries

³ Iain Harris, “Nier Replicant features cut content from the original and something for ‘Dad Nier’ fans,” PCGames, April 15th, 2021, https://www.pcgamesn.com/nier-replicant/cut-content
like *The Legend of Zelda* such as fragmentation, ornamentation, inversion etc. are almost entirely absent throughout NieR. Instead, the careful placement and recontextualizing of leitmotivic tracks helps to give the player a deeper understanding of the significance of given plot beats as they relate to a character (or in the case of certain leitmotifs, “event-types”). Much like the narrative structure of NieR, the soundtrack’s greatest impacts are built off recontextualization, not substantial alterations to the musical material. In tandem with this recontextualization-driven musical experience, the voice’s centrality is key to NieR’s soundscape – as I argue in chapters 2 and 3, the link between the musical and character voice is substantial, creating a remarkable synthesis that lets the musical voice help to personify the characters, setting NieR apart from its contemporaries.

Given the relatively small quantity of research on NieR’s OSTs, I have had to draw from a myriad of non-musical analyses, but I would be remiss to not acknowledge my indebtedness to Christopher Greene’s work in charting the narrative structure and certain significant themes of *Replicant* (pre 1.22) and *Automata*, and Jennifer Smith’s examination of the voice in *Automata*’s soundtrack, as these were incredibly valuable foundations to build my initial research for this thesis. Hayden Harper’s analysis of the gendered elements found in NieR and other RPG soundtracks was also a useful jumping-off point to develop my analysis of the music’s relationship with femininity.

Additionally, the officially released piano transcriptions led by Monaca Studios composer Keigo Hoashi provided a stellar foundation for harmonic/melodic analysis of the principle

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leitmotifs, further buoyed by analyses such as those by Youtube channels 8-Bit Music Theory and Jonathan Barouch. Jason Brame’s graphing techniques (originally used to analyze The Legend of Zelda) additionally provided a useful foundation for illustrating the non-linear aspects of the soundtrack, the “musical collage” that the player will most often experience throughout their playthrough. I have included more linear graphs for two pivotal plot beats (Shadowlord’s Castle and the majority of Ending E) to help illustrate the musical collage that occur in the narrative’s most critical points.

Chapter 1 summarizes the bulk of 1.22, taking the reader from the beginning of the game through its first four endings (designated A, B, C, and D), while noting prominent character/event leitmotifs and marking their appearances in significant events. This is followed by a discussion of player experience of music in the series, as well as a graphical analysis of the climactic confrontation of Shadowlord’s Castle. I then summarize aspects of some non-plot-relevant motifs and discuss broad characteristics of NieR’s musical aesthetic and the player’s experiential relationship to it, taking advantage of Jason Brame’s graphing techniques to illustrate the broad musical collage driving the player experience.

Chapter 2 begins analysis of character leitmotif and role of the voice in the soundtrack, as well as linking the musical voice to that of the game’s characters. The music’s “Chaos Language” (a futuristic collage of phonemes from various languages devised by Okabe and singer Emi Evans) is highlighted as a significant step away from NieR’s immediate contemporaries. I analyze the diegetic ambiguity of themes such as “Song of the Ancients” and

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8 Ibid.
“Emil” through assessing the relationship between the characters’ diegetic voices and the non-diegetic elements found in the soundtrack, and how the voice bridges that gap. The relationship between Kainé’s principal leitmotif and the melancholy track “Grandma” is examined, digging into the lyrical and timbral similarities between the two tracks. Attention is then given to the game’s introductory and closing themes “Snow in Summer” and “Shadowlord,” discussing their contextual relationship and links with the player character and game’s final boss. Finally, I explore the theme of the player character’s sister Yonah, discussing its development and eventual “granting” of a vocal component (again leaning into diegetic ambiguity through a strong link with her character).

Chapter 3 further examines the voice’s significance in Replicant, as well as discussing the prominent role of recontextualization within the soundtrack (an aspect of NieR’s narrative that is essential to the overall experience). Substantial attention is given to the original-to-1.22-character Louise and how subsequent replays recontextualize her voice, as well as her parallels with Automata’s Simone. Following this, I argue for the retroactive linking of the voice in the track “The Wretched Automatons” with the character of P-33, and discuss some of the inconsistencies in my analysis that arise from Replicant’s limited pool of music and occasional use of what might be termed “event leitmotif.”

In chapter 4, I analyze the original-to-1.22 “Ending E,” which was planned for the original release but unable to be implemented due to time and budget constraints – Ending E comprises a comparatively short sequence of just over an hour, but is a perfect emblem of almost every technique discussed in the prior chapters – there is an intense focus on recontextualization of extant leitmotifs, additional significance granted to the voice (musical and diegetic), and a collage-like musical experience that is bookended by alternate treatments of distinct leitmotifs.
Much as it narratively serves as a thematic summation of the series to date, Ending E additionally lends a similar sense of cohesion to the overall musical approach.

In analyzing these elements of the soundtrack, I hope to illustrate how effectively the music of *NieR* buoys’ the series complex narrative through its use of recontextualization, and the remarkably close link between the musical voice and that of its characters, with the musical voice either serving as a symbolic or literal representation of the diegetic character voice. The use of Emi Evans and Okabe’s “Chaos Language” (discussed in chapter 2) to enhance the textural qualities of the music and embrace its songlike lyricism is another aspect that gives the music a distinct sense of place and character, with the dramatic impact of all these elements greatly enhancing the series’ narrative approaches.
CHAPTER 1
NARRATIVE AND LEITMOTIF IN NIER: REPLICANT VER. 1.22…

The Story in NieR

The following summary of 1.22 is based on an “idealized playthrough” as described by Christopher Greene, where the player experiences only the essential plot elements required to reach the game’s multiple endings. Errors such as player deaths, reloads, etc. are not accounted for in this hypothetical playthrough, nor are sidequests that divert from the critical path. I will highlight significant leitmotifs as they appear in the narrative, and following the plot synopsis, I will break down the loose experiential elements of the game’s soundtrack and examine its collage-like playback structure and overall aesthetics. This analysis highlights both the nonlinear elements of the musical collage in more freeform sequences vs the dense leitmotif-driven collaging of plot heavy sequences such as Shadowlord’s Castle. Tracks designated as leitmotivic more or less exclusively carry the motif in the vocal line, with “variants” altering the musical textures surrounding it rather than altering the theme itself.

*Replicant* opens with a tutorial sequence set in Summer 2053, with the player-named Protagonist and his sick sister Yonah taking refuge in the ruins of an abandoned shop building – the city surrounding them is in disarray, abandoned and snowing heavily. The sense of loneliness and isolation is enhanced by the game’s introductory track, “Snow in Summer,” with its spacious and mournful children’s choir. Ethereal monsters called Shades descend on the building, with the Protagonist fighting them off (and “Snow in Summer” layering in an intense orchestra and

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percussion element). After the Shades are dispatched, the Protagonist returns to find Yonah on the verge of death, and the tutorial sequence ends with him screaming for help.

The game then flashes forward 1,200 years, to a quaint pastoral village where the Protagonist continues to care for his sister, bedridden with an incurable disease called The Black Scrawl. Shades stalk the land, and mankind is on the verge of extinction. The Protagonist’s village is overseen by the twin sisters Devola and Popola, who share the gentle “Song of the Ancients” leitmotif (which initially serves as a background track for the village). In the search for a cure for Yonah, the Protagonist fights innumerable Shades, gradually accruing the help of an eccentric cast of characters – the sentient and self-important book Grimoire Weiss, the foul-mouthed half-Shade woman Kainé, and eventually the mysterious 12-year-old boy Emil (who is afflicted by a curse that causes anything he sets his eyes on to turn to stone).

![Figure 1. Concept art of the four leads of Replicant. From left to right: Yonah, the Protagonist, Kainé, and Emil (in his human form).](https://nier.square-enix-games.com/en-us/#characters)

The Protagonist’s initial encounter with Kainé is violent, but the hostility is undercut after she rescues them from a gigantic lizard-like Shade, and this also gives the player their first

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encounter with her leitmotif – undercutting the impression of this crass and violent woman with lush harmonies and delicate piano writing. She eventually joins the player’s party after the Protagonist and Weiss assist her in destroying the lizard Shade, who is revealed to have killed her grandmother years prior and is ultimately responsible for her possession by a Shade. This climactic boss fight also introduces the uncanny and spiraling “Grandma” leitmotif.11

Kainé’s motif (appearing always in the tranquil “Kainé – Salvation” variant during the first playthrough) continues to punctuate major plot beats. While her vulgar and violent behavior persists throughout the narrative, it is often undercut through this motif and instances where it accompanies moments of tenderness on her part – the most substantial of which is doubtless after the party meets the boy Emil. After ridding Emil’s haunted mansion of Shades and a demonic book (a more primitive counterpart to Weiss), Kainé talks to him about his curse, and tells him that his eyes are “not a sin,” emphasizing the kindness at the heart of her character (and foreshadowing the closeness of her relationship with Emil).

The game’s fairly low-stakes and carefree first half ends abruptly not long after this tender moment: swarms of Shades storm the Protagonist’s village, and a monstrous Kaiju-sized Shade joins the assault moments later (this is the first and most extensive appearance of the cataclysmic “Dark Colossus Destroys All” track).12 Despite doing their best to hold the beast off, the Protagonist, Weiss, and Kainé are eventually overwhelmed, and the situation grows ever more dire when a visibly human-like Shade with power over the others (referred to as the Shadowlord) mortally wounds the Protagonist and kidnaps Yonah. To close out the first act,

11 “Boss fights” are a term used to describe game encounters with unique/powerful enemies that often relate to story progression.
12 “Kaiju” is a Japanese term for a huge monster, popularized in media by the likes of Godzilla, Mothra, and King Ghidora.
Kainé forces Emil to petrify her so she can imprison the Kaiju Shade – this is the first non-diegetic appearance of Emil’s theme, in its melancholy “Sacrifice” variant.

The game’s second half jumps five years in the future, with the Protagonist now a young man. The Shades’ threat has only worsened, and the Protagonist has made it his mission to destroy as many as he can in the hopes of finding the Shadowlord. Emil has spent the years searching for a way to unpetrify Kainé and remove the curse from his eyes – with the help of the Protagonist, Emil discovers the origin of his curse, which reveals that he and his sister were both manufactured as magical weapons, with his sister Halua having been transformed into a horrific skeletal killing machine. The Protagonist and Emil are eventually able to subdue what remains of his sister and circumvent Emil’s curse, at the cost of Emil’s body being transformed into a similar skeletal monstrosity. In this moment, “Emil – Sacrifice” returns, inexorably linking itself with his character.

“Kainé – Salvation” returns as Emil unpetrifies her, marking the second half of the game proper: In this latter half, the Protagonist along with Kainé and Emil take down a series of powerful Shades, gathering keys that will grant them entrance to the Shadowlord’s lair. The
party are set off on this quest by Devola and Popola, and throughout the process revisit areas encountered in the game’s first half, with events now noticeably darker than the first half. Many side characters die or spiral into self-destructive cycles, with the Protagonist and the party at large growing ever more heartless in their war against the Shades. A battle against another massive Kaiju Shade that had disguised itself as a young girl named Louise (featuring the original-to-1.22 leitmotif “Fleeting Words, and the death of a dear friend in the Kingdom of Façade are relevant points that will be discussed in more detail later.

Following the assembling of the key, the party begins their siege of Shadowlord’s Castle, marking the first and only full return of “Snow in Summer” – as they make the climb up through the Lost Shrine that contains the gate, the music gradually builds in much the same way it did in the opening, again tying itself to the Protagonist’s desperate desire to save Yonah. At the gateway into the castle, Devola and Popola confront the Protagonist, revealing that they were in league with the Shadowlord from the game’s beginning, serving as overseers for the Protagonist’s village. This activates the main backing track for the sequence, “Shadowlord’s Castle – Roar,” which has also served as a theme for boss enemy Shades in the Northern and Southern Plains. Here it is recontextualized and eventually subverted by the triumphant “Emil – Karma” as the party receives assistance from the King and soldiers of Façade and gain the upper hand – the two motifs share keys and identical bass lines for their main refrains, which results in a seamless transition between the two.

Battling through swarms of Shades, the party eventually confronts Devola and Popola once again, resulting in the transformative and climactic treatment of their motif “Song of the Ancients.” This variant (subtitled “Fate”) is raucous and percussive, featuring the only contrapuntal variation of a character leitmotif encountered in the series – when the Protagonist
eventually delivers a fatal blow to Devola, the percussive backing of “Fate” is replaced with the gentle guitar of her variant. In Popola’s heartbreak at the death of her sister, she begins a self-destructive magical attack that threatens to overwhelm the party – in this moment, Emil uses the last of his power to free the Protagonist, Weiss, and Kainé, sacrificing himself to Popola’s onslaught as “Emil – Sacrifice” comes to the forefront for the last time. This placement of Emil’s leitmotif is a prime example of NieR’s moment-moment recontextualization, transforming from the triumphant strains of “Karma” earlier in the castle to the voice of a scared child who doesn’t want to die, much akin to Automata’s evolving cues discussed by Jennifer Smith (shifting our perception of the voice and music over the course of a sequence).\textsuperscript{13}

In the Devola/Popola confrontation and the subsequent boss fight with the Shadowlord, the game’s first grim twist is unveiled: Shades are all that remains of the original human race, free-roaming souls severed from their bodies to try and stave off the Black Scrawl. The Protagonist and every other human character are “Replicants,” empty bodies designed to be hosts for the Shades that gained a consciousness of their own. This ill-fated scheme (named Project Gestalt) will be discussed in more detail in chapter 4.

In the final boss fight (accompanied by the bombastic “Shadowlord”), it is revealed that Yonah was kidnapped to give her corresponding Shade the body it was due in accordance with the plan to reunite body and soul. In the climactic final fight, however, Yonah’s Shade confronts the twinned pair of the Protagonist and Shadowlord and makes the choice to sacrifice herself for the sake of the Replicant Yonah. Weiss eventually sacrifices himself to weaken the Shadowlord’s power, and the Protagonist executes the Shadowlord in cold blood, rescuing his

\textsuperscript{13} Smith, “Worldbuilding Voices,” 105-110.
sister in a textbook ending for the fantasy RPG genre. This comprises only the game’s first “Ending A,” however – the player is encouraged to replay the second half of the game over, which recontextualizes and subtitles the actions and guttural howls of the Shades (revealing the wrongs they suffered at the hands of the Replicants and the Protagonist) as well as expanding Kainé and Emil’s narratives. The most substantial changes (which will be discussed in more detail later) are the “novel” segments for Kainé and Emil, the recontextualization of Louise’s story into a far more heartbreaking context, and Ending B itself.

Ending B concludes the narrative from the Shadowlord’s perspective, revealing that he was the version of the Protagonist controlled in the game’s tutorial, and highlighting the heartbreak he feels in failing to rescue his own sister. Route B is largely a much darker experience, with the inevitable tragedies playing out despite the player’s newfound understanding of their actions – arguably the only bit of added levity being the post-credits reveal that Emil has survived his noble sacrifice in the Shadowlord’s Castle, albeit only as a head.

The story is still not over, as the second half can be replayed for two more endings (expanding on the story of Devola and Popola and revealing the final pieces of Louise’s story). After the events of ending A, Kainé’s Shade begins to overtake her, and in the struggle against it, the Protagonist is given a final choice: To kill Kainé in the process of killing her Shade or sacrifice his own life/existence to save her. The outcomes of this choice comprise endings C and D, and in the latter (canon) option, the Protagonist is erased from reality (along with the player’s save data, removing any indication that they ever played the game). Kainé reunites with Yonah,

14 Since 1981’s Donkey Kong, “Save the Princess” has been a common story trope in video games.
and the game comes to a permanent end… unless the player decides to start over from the very beginning and start the cycle anew.\footnote{Toylogic, \textit{NieR: Replicant ver. 1.22474487139}, Square Enix 2021.}

**Player Experience of Music in NieR**

Music forms a near-constant part of the player experience in both \textit{NieR} titles – backing tracks are only silenced in extremes of dramatic punctuation, with music otherwise playing near-constantly throughout the series. A player’s experience in \textit{Replicant} and \textit{Automata} is of a near-unbroken collage of tracks, and with the music’s ready lyricism and songlike qualities, it rarely grows tiresome even in the game’s repeated playthroughs (something that is enhanced through \textit{1.22}’s minor additions of dynamic layering to certain overworld tracks such as “Hills of Radiant Wind”). The musical collaging effect in the regular gameplay loop is further emphasized in \textit{Replicant}’s infamous “novel” sequences, which take place within the minds of characters and present themselves as text adventures, with persistent and rapid thematic collaging. Jason Brame’s graphing methods serve as an excellent medium for illustrating the non-linear collage of typical overworld traversal, though they do not illustrate some of the commonalities in harmony and tempo that will be discussed later.

In sequences like the battle through Shadowlord’s Castle, \textit{Replicant} retains its collage-like structure for organizing its tracks, but with greater focus on deploying significant leitmotifs in sequence to reinforce the narrative’s events. This results in numerous leitmotifs appearing in comparatively short sequences, but due to their placement elsewhere in the narrative, the player has an existing familiarity that results in the themes granting a sense of clarity, rather than
disorientation. Significant new tracks (bolded in the table below) are given extensive time in the spotlight, allowing the player to gain familiarity with them.

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<tr>
<td>Rescue by the King of Façade:</td>
<td>“Emil – Karma”</td>
<td>Smoothly transitions out of the previous track through shared bassline/tempo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second encounter with twins:</td>
<td>“Song of the Ancients – Fate”</td>
<td>This is the first instance hearing the “Fate” variant in full.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devola/Emil’s deaths:</td>
<td>“SotA – Devola” / Emil - Sacrifice</td>
<td>Transitions back to two familiar tracks in the shared heartbreak of the party and Popola.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kainé and Protagonist mourn. Shadowlord braces for confrontation:</td>
<td>“Yonah – Piano”</td>
<td>The same motif that preceded the journey to the castle – now in microcosm, signifying that the last step of the journey is just ahead.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confrontation with Shadowlord:</td>
<td>“Shadowlord” / “Dispossession”</td>
<td>Discussed in detail later.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Optional: Battle with Kainé for endings C/D):</td>
<td>“The Dark Colossus Destroys All”</td>
<td>Akin to its first appearance, disrupting a seeming moment of peace.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endings A-D:</td>
<td>“Ashes of Dreams” in English, French, German, and a music box rendition.</td>
<td>Discussed in detail later.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3. Breakdown of the musical collage that occurs in Shadowlord’s Castle.

On average, this sequence takes between 60 and 80 minutes to complete (with time allowed for cutscenes). While the leitmotivic density is high, it is oriented around material that should be familiar to the player by this point – with the exception of “Shadowlord,” the new tracks are leitmotivically connected to already familiar themes, and accompanying its newness,
“Shadowlord” is granted the most substantial time in the spotlight. With this illustration of one of Replicant’s more focused musical medleys, I will now turn to the broader experience of music in NieR and the distinct aesthetics that have so greatly contributed to the series’ musical flavor.

Musical aesthetics of NieR

In breaking down the plot orienting discussion around character-based leitmotif, I have neglected the background music which otherwise appears throughout the game – as discussed, music almost never stops playing in NieR, and while the above summary covers many plot-relevant motifs, the bulk of Replicant background music has been graphed below following Jason Brame’s methodology. This technique serves to illustrate a player’s general experience as they move from area to area within the game – separate bubbles denote areas separated by loading screens which fade between the listed tracks.

![Graph of major background tracks in NieR: Replicant ver. 1.22. Dungeon themes omitted.](image)

Figure 4. Graph of major background tracks in NieR: Replicant ver. 1.22. Dungeon themes omitted.

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Of these tracks, the vibrant “Hills of Radiant Wind” is likely the most heard in a player’s time with the game, as the Northern and Southern Plains form conduits to most plot-centric areas, as well as giving the player an ample supply of Shades to farm and level up. “City of Commerce” and “The Lost Forest” are two instrumental variants of this theme, though they retain backing vocals (and are the most significant alterations to a leitmotivic melody in the OST). Other locations in the graph feature motivically independent themes, each emphasizing the more unique characteristics of their corresponding area (coincidentally, these are all areas that either consist of or connect to one of the game’s dungeons).

Overworld background tracks are largely pastoral, featuring a great deal of modal writing, with instrumentations centering guitar and unpitched percussion. The “Hills of Radiant Winds” do not alter the character of the track, merely reorchestrating the principal theme and altering the backing textures. “Lost Forest” brings the guitar to the forefront melodically, whereas “City of Commerce” trades out the lead vocals for flute and mandolin. This pastoral approach to scoring is in keeping with Replicant’s post-apocalyptic environs: While the game’s tutorial sequence and final act of routes A-D take place in the ruins of an urban center, most of the game features vast open fields, cozy villages and cities that have not advanced far past the medieval era in their construction, and a generally fantastical air to it.

Even with the game’s melancholy tone, the first half leans heavily into the narrative tropes and aesthetics of titles such as Final Fantasy or The Legend of Zelda, two series that doubtless greatly influenced NieR. While Automata leans heavily into an urban post-apocalypse

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17 See for example the humorous homage to The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker upon rescuing the King of Façade: https://youtu.be/HHZFV2oPtV8?t=466
(something we see reflected in the prominent metallic percussion in its OST), Replicant contains only hints of a traditional post-apocalyptic frame, aiming for a much more pastoral/fantasy-influenced world, and this is reflected in its music. Place themes (with exceptions such as “Cold Steel Coffin”) are most often upbeat and ethereal, typically distinguishing themselves through orchestration choices (such as “The Prestigious Mask’s” vibrant piano and oboe melodies placing it at odds with the lyrical guitar of “Lost Forest”).

![Contrasted environs of NieR: Replicant (left) and Automata (right).](image)

Boss tracks are much more standard fare for the action-RPG genre – the two most common tracks encountered for boss encounters are “Deep Crimson Foe” and “Shadowlord’s Castle – Roar.” Both tracks are emblematic of NieR’s approach to boss music as a whole, having dynamic and active orchestral passages driven by vigorous percussion. Tonal syntax aside, these tracks wouldn’t feel terribly out of place in some of NieR’s contemporaries such as Dark Souls and Bayonetta.18 “Deep Crimson Foe” (most often used for fights with dungeon bosses) has sparser textures and a vigorous syncopated element to its scoring (and as Greene notes, harkens back to Orff’s Carmina Burana).19 By contrast, “Roar” follows a more modal progression, which

18 Compare “Deep Crimson Foe’s” rhythmic intensity to a track such as “Taurus Demon” from Dark Souls.
allows it to blend more seamlessly with the surrounding overworld music (which it is most likely to interrupt).

These boss tracks are an immediate timbral departure from the overworld’s orchestration, a trait shared with the unique dungeon areas encountered in-game. The Junk Heap’s more sci-fi atmosphere is immediately enhanced by “The Wretched Automatons” vocal synthesizers and metallic percussion backing, whereas Emil’s Mansion is distinguishable due to the static and sparse choral textures of “The Ultimate Weapon.” Many tracks throughout the game share basslines and other chord progressions (ex. Shadowlord’s Castle and Emil’s theme), and the harmonic language is doubtless one of the soundtrack’s most consistent elements, with saturated modal writing and progressions through the circle of fifths predominant throughout the OST.

![Comparison of “Shadowlord’s Castle – Roar” (left) and “Emil – Karma” (right) illustrating the shared bassline/similar tempi.](image)

This cohesive approach to melody and harmony is in keeping with franchises such as The Legend of Zelda, which firmly establishes a repository of melodic/harmonic practice for its major themes across the series. Tracks that deviate from NieR’s norm such as “Blu-Bird” and “Cold Steel Coffin” immediately stand out from the remaining soundtrack due to their harmonic and/or

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20 Keigo Hoashi, et al. NieR Gestalt and Replicant Piano Collection, 64, 68.
timbral palettes: the former places an extreme emphasis on male voices, already a departure for the majority female-led soundtrack, and this is further emphasized by the prominent “Bulgarian Choir” chanting that occurs over top. The latter displays a much more chromatic language than any other area themes, creating a striking contrast with the otherwise diatonic and modal soundscapes that define the overworld. In a musical world defined by melodic/harmonic continuity, Okabe and co. can immediately create a sense of the disjunct through deviations that may seem minor out of context, an important factor in structuring a game’s soundtrack. With how sparely tracks such as “Blu-Bird” are utilized, it lends their departure from the overall palette a substantial impact.

The overall smoothness of most other cue transitions (similar characteristics of modality, instrumentation and tempo etc.) gives Replicant’s soundscape a remarkable cohesion compared to its immediate contemporaries, a trend continued in Automata. While the two titles differ substantially in their orchestration, they are quite similar from a melodic and harmonic standpoint, with the core aspect of song-like lyricism uniting almost every track in the series. And with this overview of the broad aesthetics of the music concluded, we can now engage with the most substantial and constant element of the NieR soundtrack(s): The voice.

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CHAPTER 2

THE VOICE IN (THE MUSIC OF) NIER

“Chaos Language” and the Solo Voice

The voice is vital to the music of NieR: in Replicant, only the “Dispossession” track and its variants lack vocals entirely, with the few area leitmotifs that lack vocal melodies still featuring backing vocals. While a playthrough of Automata likely features less time with background vocals due to the game’s densely layered dynamic soundtrack, its soundtrack also features near-constant vocals. To grant the vocal lines more textural variety, Okabe and lead singer Emi Evans collaborated to create themes in “futuristic” versions of extant languages, referred to as “Chaos Language” by Evans.23 This gives the music a songlike and narrative quality, though not drawing attention to itself in the way music with actual lyrics would. This was a deliberate part on the choice of series creator Yoko Taro according to Evans, and sidesteps issues encountered in similar dialogue-heavy games such as the Persona series, which feature English lyrics in their OSTs.24

According to Evans, Taro “wanted a heavily vocal soundtrack which would create an otherworldly atmosphere – the atmosphere of many different worlds in fact.”25 Chaos Language is made up of phonemes from languages including English, Gaelic, French, Japanese, German, and others, building up a collage-like sense of many places and languages that have filtered into the post-apocalyptic setting the soundtrack accompanies. Almost every track in NieR utilizes this

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25 Ibid.
specific conceit, with the only exception being “Song of the Ancients,” which was written in purely nonsense phonemes prior to the creation of Chaos Language.\textsuperscript{26} As an expressive device, Chaos Language allows \textit{NieR}’s soundscape to separate itself from its contemporaries, bearing just enough of a resemblance to real-world languages that it grants Evans’ singing a richer and more meaningful presence.

In Hayden Harper’s analysis of gendered musical tropes in RPGs and the ways \textit{Automata} subverts them, he discusses several ways that \textit{NieR} differentiates itself from other RPGs, arguing that the textual elements of Chaos Language set it apart from contemporaneous soundscapes.\textsuperscript{27} Harper’s concept of the “Ah song” (music where the female voice only sings on an “ah”) argues that the feminine voice has functioned in many games as a background device that renders the female voice as a “voice object” in many prior games, then suggesting \textit{Automata} subverts tropes such as this through its densely lyric-driven soundtrack. Harper argues that the texted elements grant the female voice an identity denied to it compared to the “Ah song” trope, and as I will soon discuss, I believe this identity is deeply linked to \textit{Replicant}’s eccentric cast of characters.

Building on Harper’s analyses of gendered musical tropes (where he compares the maximalist “hyper-masculine” scoring of games like \textit{Dark Souls} to the more reserved approach of \textit{NieR}), it is worth engaging with the role of gender in the \textit{NieR} soundtrack as a whole: Evans’ vocal lead on most tracks instantly centers the feminine voice in the soundscape, and indeed, the masculine voice is near-absent in \textit{Replicant} and \textit{Automata}. Despite a prominent early feature in the tracks “Blu-Bird” and “The Incomplete Stone” (both centering a choir of male voices), these instances remain isolated, almost foreign to the remainder of the soundtrack. The female voice


drives the musical experience, and while much has been penned (and surely will continue to be) on the *NieR* franchise’s relationship to sexualization/empowerment of its female characters, I think that the female voice’s prominence does an excellent job at highlighting their vital role in the story, as we will see later discussing Kainé. While *Replicant*’s male Protagonist serves as an archetypal character for fantasy action, the female voice’s prominence on the soundtrack is much more readily linked to characters such as Devola, Popola, and Kainé (and eventually Yonah).

The solo voice’s centrality also sets *NieR*’s soundscape apart from its contemporary action RPGs – while adjacent franchises such as *Final Fantasy*, *Drakengard*, *Bayonetta* and *Dark Souls* feature choral elements in their scoring, the solo voice is used only rarely (as Harper notes, the solo voice sets itself apart in *Dark Souls* similarly to *NieR*’s most maximalist choral tracks).28 *NieR* certainly does not shy away from bombastic choral writing in its boss tracks, but its overriding focus is on the solo voice, with the intimate and songlike nature of the scoring contrasting heavily with its contemporaries.

The near-perpetual presence of the voice on the OST (and Evans’ role as lead singer on most tracks) lends a persistent sense of familiarity throughout the music’s shifting moods and atmospheres. Even in timbrally and texturally differentiated tracks such as “The Wretched Automatons” or “The Ultimate Weapon,” Evans’ voice links back to the remainder of the OST, which enables tracks such as “Dark Colossus,” “Blu-Bird,” and “Cold Steel Coffin” to alienate themselves from the remainder of the soundtrack through not centering her.

In the following subsections, I break down the central cast’s leitmotifs. With the exception of Emil’s theme, Evans sings lead vocals on all tracks. Beginning with “Song of the

28 Ibid, 81-82.
Ancients” as it has the most obvious diegetic ambiguity, I then move through the remaining character themes and dissect the myriad ways in which the musical voice links to and represents these characters. Blurred diegesis, subversion of narrative characteristics, and varied musical symbolism are present across these leitmotifs, and the ways each theme reflects and subverts the roles of the characters in the narrative will be discussed in each section as well.

**Devola, Popola, and Fate**

“Song of the Ancients” is the first piece of music the player hears after the tutorial sequence finishes – beginning with the ethereal chimes of the “Popola” variant and fading out to the gentle, diegetic guitar strains of the “Devola” variant. The former variation is never heard with vocals in-game, the latter’s vocals are dependent on the player’s position relative to Devola (she sings first by the village fountain, then later moves to a local bar). As the player moves closer, her vocals grow stronger in the mix, though the guitar is ever present in the soundscape of the Protagonist’s village, causing the track to traverse Stillwell’s “fantastical gap.” This early blurring of the musical/character voice in Replicant sets the tone for much of the soundtrack, though few other tracks are as overtly ambiguous as “Song of the Ancients,” which is described in-game as a song prophesizing Grimoire Weiss’s saving mankind from the curse of the Black Scrawl, “in a language nobody understands.”

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The centrality of “Song of the Ancients” as the background music for the Protagonist’s village centers it as one of Replicant’s most prominent tracks – the pastoral guitar and gentle percussiveness of the “Devola” variant allow transitions between the village and the plains beyond to fade between tracks near-seamlessly, even with the substantial density in orchestration and differing keys of “Hills of Radiant Wind” and “The Lost Forest.” These three tracks are additionally linked through near-identical tempo and compound meter, further solidifying the timbral links between theme between them (“Devola” is marked at quarter = 81, with “Hills” at eighth = 160). Whenever the player enters the village library and the “Popola” variant activates, the two tracks share the same harmonic progression, so even with the significant timbral shift, the player is not disoriented by the musical transitions.

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“Song of the Ancients” centrality to the soundtrack results in it being one of the finest examples of Replicant’s recontextualizing of musical themes, discussed in more detail in chapter 3. Even with the diegetic aspects associated with Devola and Popola, a first-time player will likely grow to associate it simply with the in-game area of the Protagonist’s village – like other background music, it does not change throughout the game, and in a player’s many hours spent in the world it easily can be perceived as a simple area theme. This is arguably reinforced towards the end of the first half, when the bombastic “Fate” variant first appears. This plays during the initial confrontation with the Shadowlord, prior to Yonah’s kidnapping, in a moment where Weiss and the Protagonist are briefly able to stand up to the Shadowlord (and Weiss’s dark counterpart, Grimoire Noir). It represents a moment of triumph for the party and the village as a whole, and could also be viewed as symbolic of the song’s “prophecy,” which speaks of Weiss’s triumph against Noir and the Black Scrawl.

This perception of the theme is upended during the encounter in Shadowlord’s Castle, however. During the second encounter with Devola and Popola, the secret of the Shades and Replicants is unveiled, and as the fight commences, the emphatic statement of “Fate” fully recontextualizes the theme as belonging to Devola and Popola. In keeping with the fight being against both twins, this is one of the only contrapuntal treatments of a leitmotif in the series, with their voices singing in imitation and harmony together during the fight (see Figure 8 below). When Devola passes away, the last brutal stretch of the fight shifts to her variant of the theme, accompanied by Popola’s heartbroken screams at the loss of her sister.
When the player begins their replays of the second half, “Song of the Ancients” serves as a constant reminder of the looming betrayal and tragedy that awaits the twins, contributing to the dramatic irony of the post-Ending-A routes (again demonstrating the recontextualizing and humanizing evolution of the music as discussed by Jennifer Smith). The thematic recontextualizing of “Song of the Ancients” firmly links it to Devola and Popola’s voices, giving the formerly quaint and pastoral music that followed the player through the village a far more bittersweet sensation – particularly as Devola’s variant is the last version of the theme the player will hear in routes A through D.

**Emil – Karma, Sacrifice (and Despair)**

Emil’s theme is perhaps the most obvious instance of a leitmotif being linked directly with the character’s voice – alongside “Snow in Summer,” it is the only theme to utilize the voice of a child singer, a young boy. As Emil is perpetually a twelve-year-old, the link between his musical representation is much more overt than other character leitmotifs, which all carry distinct musical characteristics but are linked through sharing Emi Evans’ voice. Analyzed from a purely melodic standpoint, Emil’s theme follows a G major verse-E minor chorus structure, but

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31 Smith, “Worldbuilding Voices,” 106-8
Okabe’s harmonizing of the verse sets all variants of the leitmotif firmly in E minor (see Figure 9 below), giving the theme a remarkably bittersweet character.

Figure 9: Emil’s leitmotif, with chord changes above the staff. The melody and harmony are unchanged in “Sacrifice” and “Karma,” with only the repeat omitted in Automata’s “Despair” variant.

The melody itself is rather light and carefree, something that is utilized to humorous effect for Emil’s appearances in NieR: Automata, where the verse is sung as a boisterous march set squarely in G major. This is the only purely diegetic instance of Emil’s theme being linked to his voice, but it further establishes his character’s connection to the theme. It’s possible that this treatment was just something creator Yoko Taro thought would be funny, but it nonetheless demonstrates a “canon” diegesis to his theme, much akin to “Song of the Ancients – Devola.”

“Sacrifice” is the most heard variant of Emil’s theme in Replicant, with delicate orchestration and a slow tempo emphasizing its melancholy character. Fittingly, it most often appears at points where Emil is experiencing a moment of sacrifice or otherwise suffering –

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32 PlatinumGames, NieR:Automata, Square Enix 2017.
being forced to petrify Kainé (one of the only people in the world who didn’t regard Emil’s curse with fear), the transformation of his body into the uncanny skeletal form, the explosion of his powers that destroys The Aerie, and his final sacrifice in the Shadowlord’s Castle.

Its cyclical deployment results in this last appearance anticipating his sacrifice for the player – in most prior instances, “Sacrifice” serves as coda to a tragedy, but in this instance it appears beforehand, with the mournful strings arriving in tandem with Emil’s declaration that everything will be alright. The melancholy cries of the vocalist on the soundtrack accompany the encroaching darkness that surrounds Emil in the moment of his death, as Emil ruminates on his fear of being alone and losing the people he cares about. The two voices – Emil’s diegetic voice and the voice on the soundtrack – work in tandem in expressing the moment’s tragedy, and in the player’s repeated playthroughs, the connection between these two voices is thoroughly reinforced.

“Karma” by contrast, appears comparatively infrequently – its most prominent appearances are in Shadowlord’s Castle and in a climactic point of Ending E, which will be discussed in chapter 3. Compared to the “Sacrifice” variant’s sparse string harmonies, “Karma” uses lush chordal arpeggiations for its harmonic backdrop, as well as adding a dense percussive layer. Unlike “Sacrifice” it is in a fast cut time, though the melody remains at approximately the same tempo through rhythmic augmentation. While it maintains a melancholy edge, the energetic nature of “Karma” and placement in moments that highlight more heroic moments does give it a noticeably different character to “Sacrifice.”

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33 “Karma” is set at quarter=155, whereas “Sacrifice” is set at quarter=75 in the NieR Gestalt/Replicant sheet music release.
Emil’s theme is also noteworthy for having the most explicit link with a character not Emil – in this case, the young King of Façade. Like Emil, the King is a young boy subject to tragedy in his life, with his father passing away of the same Black Scrawl that afflicts Yonah, and eventually the death of his wife Fyra on their wedding day at the hands of a Shade. The King does not share Emil’s vocals in the appearance of the “Karma” variant, but during Fyra’s death, vocals do appear as “Sacrifice” plays. This placement highlights the parallels between the two characters, the unjust tragedy that these two young men suffer time and again. Additionally, “Sacrifice” plays briefly during the cutscene of Devola’s death, before her variant of “Song of the Ancients” plays. It could be argued that this extraneous usage (likely done due to having a limited pool of music to draw from) weakens the connection to Emil and his voice, but I think the connection remains strong. The King only has two links to Emil’s theme (even if the player experiences them repeatedly), and the vast majority of instances where “Sacrifice” plays are tied to Emil. Even with the few scenes where it serves as a backdrop to the tragic experiences of others, the other characters lack the vocal connection, something that is made even more explicit in Automata.

Emil is only a side character in that title: having used his powers to try and aid the fights against the Alien invasion, he has split himself into countless clones in an attempt to keep the war of Alien and Android somewhat under control. The process has taken a huge toll on his mind, and the version of Emil encountered by the Androids 2B and 9S is not the one the player knows in Replicant. If a player reaches the max level of 99 and fully upgrades every weapon in the game, they are given the option to fight Emil as a superboss in that title, which consists of battling the countless lingering clones who have gradually lost their minds during the thousands
of years of war.\textsuperscript{34} Emil’s leitmotif gets one more variant in this climactic fight, titled “\textit{Emil – Despair}.” This track is the only choral treatment of his theme, though it is different than any other work with choir in the series: The theme is given through a boys’ choir singing in unison, linking the plurality of musical voices with the despairing cries of his clones throughout the boss battle. The only solo voice (again a boy) appears in a new refrain melody, which was added to the instrumental breakdown of “Karma” in 1.22, which could be considered a sort of leitmotivic “retcon,” and is a fine example of the duology’s metatextual responses to one another.

One can consider this standalone voice as being linked to the Emil the characters spend their time with in the remainder of \textit{Automata}, as he persists and maintains his sanity during the boss fight. The choice to include this melody as a sort of foreshadowing in the 1.22 version of \textit{Replicant} further leans into the notion of this refrain being linked to the “main” Emil of \textit{Automata}, as the other main quest the player can do involves him slowly working to recover his memories from the years before the war. In delivering the final blow and finally giving the otherwise immortal Emil(s) an opportunity to finally come to rest, “Sacrifice” returns for the last time in the series, a lonely boy singing his sad song.

\textbf{Kainé and Her Grandma}

The lush modal harmonies and gentle piano ostinato of Kainé’s leitmotif are some of the most musically distinctive in the entirety of \textit{Replicant}. First appearing in the “\textit{Kainé – Salvation}” variant after she rescues the Protagonist from Hook and is injured in the process, it immediately distinguishes itself from the folksy pastoral instrumentation that has driven the majority of the soundtrack up to this point – the piano and ethereal chimes grant the theme an immediate timbral

\textsuperscript{34} “Superbosses” are boss fights that represent the peak of difficulty in a given game, often being more powerful than story-based bosses.
distinction (and a link to another substantial theme tied to Kainé). The dense harmonies and lack of distinct cadential motion additionally set the theme apart. Organized in an A/B form, the theme shifts between a loose G minor modality and a bright C Lydian sequence.

Figure 10. Lead sheet of Kainé’s theme, demonstrating the modal saturation and unprepared modulation common to both A/B sections.

Figure 11. Piano ostinato introduction to Kainé’s leitmotif. The piano serves as a regular signifier for her theme throughout.\(^{35}\)

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The initial appearance leaves Kainé an enigma – the violent and ill-tempered woman accompanied by music that could not be more her opposite, with the lush harmonies and Evans’ soothing voice placed at odds with Laura Bailey’s obscene yelling. The theme’s next appearance obscures its relationship with her, as the Protagonist and Weiss deliver news of a tragedy to a pair of young brothers after the second substantial dungeon: perhaps the theme will simply function as punctuation to significant story beats? However, in the immediately succeeding rematch with Hook, “Salvation” is firmly reestablished as Kainé’s theme, in tandem with another leitmotif that hints at the tragedy in her past.

The fight with Hook is brutal and difficult, with its musical backdrop initially represented by the Aerie’s leitmotif “Cold Steel Coffin” – following a phase change where the creature attempts to lull Kainé into a sense of security (and her subsequent rebuttal) the music shifts into the “Grandma” leitmotif, seemingly activated by her voice. The only other piano-driven track in Replicant’s soundtrack, “Grandma” is a gentle passacaglia built around an 8-bar loop in Bb minor. Originally intended for the game’s tutorial sequence, it was moved to this boss fight and linked with Kainé’s traumatic backstory.

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36 Bailey voices Kainé in both the original 2011 release of Replicant and 1.22.
Figure 12. Hook, the gigantic lizard-like Shade that is responsible for the death of Kainé’s grandma.

Built around a short ascending bassline and a spiraling triplet piano ostinato, the track is cued in upon Kainé telling Hook that she will “rip out your fucking heart!” in response to it summoning the voice of her deceased grandmother to try and disarm her. Unlike preceding boss tracks, “Grandma” maintains its melancholy atmosphere throughout, without layering in any of the bombastic percussive elements that have to this point defined NieR’s boss music. The track remains focused on its three principal layers of ostinato, vocal melody, and a heavily backgrounded countermelody in the violins. 1.22’s reorchestration only layers in a flute trio as backing harmony deeper into the loop – a choice that further links “Grandma” to Kainé’s theme from a timbral standpoint.38 Christopher Greene notes how the spiraling ostinato and deliberate incompleteness of the harmonic progression results in a lack of resolution in the music itself, much akin to how Kainé’s trauma from her grandmother’s death remains unresolved.39 This lack of resolution is something that ultimately persists up through Ending E, as the Protagonist is ultimately the one to deliver the killing blow to Hook – a preemptive subversion of her agency in the narrative that will be addressed in that later sequence.

38 Don Kotowski, “MONACA Interview: Revisiting the Music of NieR” vgmo, April 30th, 2021, http://www.vgmonline.net/monacanier/
“Grandma” is the first (and possibly most substantial) instance of a track being cued in by a character’s voice in Route A – much like “Salvation” it is a sharp contrast with the verbal/physical characteristics associated with Kainé to this point in the narrative. While the most tragic details of her backstory are yet to be revealed, “Grandma” musically establishes them well in advance as the final act of the Hook battle plays out, another instance of musical foreshadowing.

![Figure 13. Piano ostinato of “Grandma,” reproduced from the piano transcription book.](image)

Following Hook’s defeat, “Salvation” returns to the soundscape, smoothly eliding from one piano ostinato into another. Kainé is on the verge of death, but the Protagonist and Weiss (with varying degrees of enthusiasm) beg for her to hold on and keep living. As she awakens from the verge of death (accompanied by “Repose”) and decides to join the Protagonist’s motley adventuring party, “Salvation” is most thoroughly established as her leitmotif. Despite the uncouth intro of a violently confrontational and obscene character, these paired motifs firmly establish a lot of the core depth behind her character – her tragic past (more clearly revealed at

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the beginning of Route B), and her ultimately kind and caring attitude towards the Protagonist (and subsequently the remainder of her found family).

These characteristics are only further emphasized throughout the repeated appearances of the theme: After the party have their first proper encounter with the young Emil (an individual similarly haunted/ostracized by aspects of his body that are beyond his control), Kainé informs him: “Your eyes are not a sin. Don’t ever be ashamed of them. They’re a vital part of you.” Following Emil’s transformation and subsequent de-petrification of her, she immediately recognizes him despite his drastic transformation. In both these instances, “Salvation” accompanies the moment, emphasizing the strength of their bond as well as linking Kainé’s verbalized kindness with the lyrical and reassuring voice on the soundtrack. In Route B, Kainé’s immediate sympathy and relating to Emil is more thoroughly contextualized: In addition to the Shade haunting her body, Kainé herself was born intersex and horrifically discriminated against by the residents of the Aerie.

The game handles this plot point with varying degrees of success: on the one hand, she is never once referred to as a man (or even referred to as masculine) by any character in-game, fully accepted as the woman she identifies as. I argue that her leitmotif further centers her femininity and orients the player towards these aspects of her character before they are more thoroughly elaborated upon by subsequent routes.41 On the other, the hyper-sexualized costuming of the character (see Figure 1) leaves room for the player to fetishize her body, something series creator Yoko Taro certainly has little objection to.42


42 Preceding the 2017 release of *Automata*, Taro famously tweeted that he would like it if someone would send him lewd 2B fanart in a .zip file. While Taro certainly does not object to frank depictions of sexuality (often
The line between Kainé owning her own femininity and sexuality or being an object for the player to leer at is a thin one – certainly no characters in-game disrespect her in this manner (with the exception of Weiss repeatedly mocking her for wearing what amounts to lingerie during grand fantasy battles), but as a game that offers a great deal of camera control, room is given for the player to objectify her. Here we see a prime example of textual dissonance vs. the capabilities of the player: An intersex woman who is never denigrated by her found family (is indeed, immediately accepted by them), is given a great deal of musical and narrative depth through her dual leitmotifs and the recontextualization of repeat playthroughs (and as we will see in chapter 4, ultimately carries the most integral narrative agency in the title)… and yet from an extratextual standpoint, succumbs to many negative tropes of female objectification in fantasy narratives. Her leitmotif’s first appearance certainly implies some dissonance with the character as we initially meet her – it is rather a pity the ways in which this dissonance expands beyond the narrative/musical text of the game itself.

Regardless of these questionably handled moments of theme and characterization, “Salvation” and “Grandma” do still thoroughly illustrate the core aspects of Kainé’s character – even if neither Okabe or Evans were entirely aware of where the latter motif was going to be placed, the timbral links between the two themes (and the subtle touches made in 1.22’s reorchestrations such as the addition of flutes after the loop point of both tracks) help to center both Kainé’s innate kindness and femininity, and the tragedies and discrimination of her youth.44

43 Meryl Links, “Thoughts on NieR Replicant ver.1.22474487139…” Medium, May 26th, 2022, https://minusplnp.medium.com/nier-replicant-90c7c87a869b
44 Kotowski, “MONACA Interview,” http://www.vgmonline.net/monacanier/
I will return to Kainé and her place in the narrative in Chapters 3 and 4 – for now, I will wrap up the remaining character leitmotifs.

**The Shadowlord and Snow in Summer (Trying to Save the One You Love)**

As the final boss of Routes A/B, the Shadowlord is one of the most musically distinct entities encountered in the game – while other motifs appearing in the castle all appear prior in the game, the titular “Shadowlord” track is unique for only appearing in that boss fight only.\(^45\) It is also noteworthy for its seeming disconnect with the character’s voice: like other Shades, the Shadowlord’s in-game voice is low, guttural, and distorted, barely recognizable as human. Considering how prominently other leitmotifs have been linked with character’s voices, the Baroque Chorale-esque scoring of “Shadowlord,” with its funereal march-like character and prominent female lead vocals, seems something of an enigma in comparison.

Figure 14. First four bars of “Shadowlord” as sung on 1.22 soundtrack. The 4-part chorale texture serves as cutscene underscore, with much more dynamic orchestral accompaniment layered into the boss fight itself.

Given the ultimate narrative implications of the fight (the Protagonist and Shadowlord’s clash ultimately leads to the extinction of humanity, as body and soul are permanently severed

\(^{45}\) With the exception of 1.22’s Ending E, to be discussed in chapter 4.
and unable to reconnect), the funereal character is more than justified: a fight where neither character truly wins, and what little remains of humanity will ultimately lose. In the mid-fight cutscene where Shade Yonah sacrifices herself, the music’s relation to the voice becomes clearer: Ending B provides subtitles for the Shadowlord in this sequence, as he begs for his sister to not sacrifice herself, and the crescendo that leads the track into its Phase 2 variant occurs in synchronization with his scream of despair after her death – in turn, the Protagonist is given a monologue during the intense opening of Phase 2. While the vocal aspect of “Shadowlord” carries no links to the character’s voice, the track as a whole can be linked to both the Protagonist and Shadowlord’s struggles to save the one they love.

In the fight’s final phase, after Weiss has sacrificed himself to bind the Shadowlord in place, an intense “bullet hell” sequence begins, with the final shift in the music occurring. The Protagonist delivers three blows to the Shadowlord, knocked back each time, and with each blow, the layers of the music alter: First, the orchestral layer is removed, leaving only choir. Next, a version of the theme played on music box is layered in – when it comes time for the final blow, only the music box plays, fading to nothing as the Protagonist murders the Shadowlord. In each ending, this reduction in musical intensity occurs in tandem with the battle’s now-inevitable outcome. The Shadowlord has failed, and so has the Protagonist, even if he doesn’t realize it yet. While “Shadowlord” is undoubtedly linked with the character it is named for, I believe that it is more helpful in analyzing the soundtrack to view it as a representation of the struggle to save the one you love – a reading that is backed up by the literal/musical events of Ending E, and will be discussed in chapter 4.

This ambiguous role of leitmotif for “Shadowlord” also draws into focus an interesting question: that of the Protagonist’s leitmotif (or lack thereof). While Automata more or less does
away with traditional character-driven leitmotif and opts for purely situational music, it is significant that *Replicant*’s Protagonist lacks a leitmotif to call his own. Unless one opts to read rarely occurring situational music such as “His Dream” or “Dispossession” as a leitmotif, the Protagonist is lacking compared to the remainder of the cast – my reading of “Shadowlord” as a portrayal of struggle allows the two to share that theme, but the soundtrack includes one other similarly isolated/significant track that is linked to both characters, and I argue forms another half of the Protagonist/Shadowlord’s Yin/Yang.

“Snow in Summer” is immediately striking for being the first piece of music that a player hears when starting the game – it also appears to mark the “beginning of the end,” when the party makes their way to Shadowlord’s Castle through the Lost Shrine. In both these instances, the Shadowlord/Protagonist are making a desperate final bid to save their sisters, and in both the introductory sequence and the climb up the Lost Shrine, the track slowly ramps up in intensity (layering in more active orchestral elements), before eventually fading out. While “Snow in Summer” is driven by a children’s choir and lacks an immediately distinct connection with either the Protagonist or Shadowlord’s voice, it carries a great deal of symbolic weight reflective of their struggles.

In the opening sequence, the young Shadowlord is left screaming for help, as the melancholy cries of “Snow in Summer” run in parallel to his increasingly desperate struggle to save Yonah. In the ascent up the Shrine, the track begins first with ambience and grows in intensity as the Protagonist grows ever more determined in his fight. The cries of the children’s

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choir carry a clear link to the desperate struggles of Shadowlord/Protagonist, even if they lack the immediate link to the diegetic voices of either character.

While “Snow in Summer” appears only rarely throughout the narrative, its appearances always accompany moments of great significance, with the track’s haunting character leaving a tremendous impact. Its last chronological appearance is in the Ending B cutscene, where the Shadowlord’s reflection on his failure to save his sister is explored, first through a flashback to the opening tutorial, and then through a “reunion” of sorts with the two Shades in an ambiguous afterlife. The lonely children, accompanied by a spare and mournful choir, share half a cookie from the tutorial sequence, and huddle for warmth. As the Protagonist lacks an explicitly designated leitmotif, I argue that “Shadowlord” and “Snow in Summer” are shared themes for him and his darker half, representing the struggle that both characters experience throughout the narrative of the game. The Protagonist’s lack of definite leitmotif may have been a conscious choice to better put the player in his shoes, but the two tracks discussed in this subsection carry clear links to both characters and their desperate struggle to save the one they love.

Given the emphasis on vocal leitmotif, this ambiguous situation is nonetheless an outlier on the soundtrack – while we can only speculate regarding the Protagonist’s lack of obvious leitmotif, the Protagonist has by far the most significant in-game voice. He and Grimoire Weiss have many conversations with each other and surrounding characters (all fully voice-acted in 1.22), and we gain the deepest understanding of his actions and motivations, so in some ways, the Protagonist does not strictly “need” a voice on the soundtrack that conveys his “true” nature. By contrast, his sister Yonah is given almost no voice until the game’s most crucial moments.

Yonah and the Ashes of Dreams

Yonah’s role in both *Replicant* and *1.22* is of someone to return to in the game’s first half, and as an object of rescue in the game’s latter half, in keeping with the “save the princess/girlfriend/powerless female character” trope that has appeared in games since 1981’s *Donkey Kong*. Her leitmotif (consisting of two gentle and lyrical contrasting sections that each move through the circle of fifths, see Figure 15) is noteworthy for its distinct lack of vocals throughout the vast majority of the game’s runtime – making her the only main character who does not receive a vocal treatment for her leitmotif within the game itself.

![Figure 15. A and B themes of “Yonah’s Theme”/“Ashes of Dreams.”](image)

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The leitmotif most often appears in two variants, a **guitar solo** that opens with the major-key section, and a **piano solo** oriented around its minor-key half – there is a variant for strings, but it almost never appears in-game. The guitar solo most often appears in sequences that emphasize the home that the Protagonist has with Yonah, with the piano version appearing more often in the second half, after Yonah has been kidnapped, reflective of the Protagonist’s melancholy over losing her (most prominently featuring before the party embark on their last adventure to the Shadowlord’s castle).

It is noteworthy then (considering the theme’s distinct lack of vocals otherwise) that the game’s credits theme “**Ashes of Dreams**” is built around her leitmotif, expanding it into a six-minute-long credits song. “Ashes” is also noteworthy for being the only track in **Replicant** to feature vocals in discreet languages (English, French, German, and Japanese, for endings A/B/C/D in the original release, with the Japanese being shifted to Ending E in 1.22). According to Evans, the original plan was for tracks in “Chaos” variants of the languages listed above, but she convinced Taro to attempt actual lyrics (and was then encouraged to make the lyrics “sadder.”)[49] The “Chaos” variant approach is likely a loose harken back to **Drakengard**, which featured credits music in varied languages for each of its main endings.[50]

A universal part of player experience in **Replicant** are loading screens that separate in-game areas – these are almost always accompanied by entries of Yonah’s diary, which contain a myriad of thoughts and descriptions of events in her day-to-day life, ranging from stories told to her by Devola and Popola to reflections on the Protagonist’s adventure. Considering the amount of time spent in-game away from Yonah (attempting to cure the Black Scrawl in the first half

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and separated from her due to the actions of the Shadowlord in the second), these diary entries provide the player with the strongest understanding of Yonah’s character – and an overarching theme of many of them is her sense of loneliness and desire to simply spend time with her brother.\textsuperscript{51} The Protagonist’s grand, textbook videogame adventure takes him perpetually away from home, and even with the game’s orientation around saving Yonah, she has remarkably little presence in the story.

“The Ashes of Dreams” utilizing of her leitmotif lends a great deal of significance then – in the game’s credits, the player is presented with a melancholy treatment of Yonah’s theme that finally gives it a voice – and not only is it lent a voice, but it’s a voice that is (likely) speaking in a language they can understand. The lyrics match the melancholy tone of the arrangement, and can be read as both a simple thematic reflection on the game as a whole, but additionally can be read as Yonah’s character, finally granted voice, reflecting on the events of the game from her perspective: “Stories of danger, fearless attack, specters of plague and pain” is doubtless a metatextual commentary on the narrative, but I argue that it also relates to Yonah’s perception of in-game events.\textsuperscript{52}

The game’s system for saving progress involves going to mailboxes, and there is reference to these saving instances being the Protagonist “sending letters” to Yonah, keeping her appraised of the events of the first half. The “stories” in “Ashes” can be argued as representing the literal narrative of the game itself, but can also be viewed through the lens of Yonah’s perception. “Ashes” closes out in sadness, with the lyrics inquiring “Have we been fighting in vain?” which is both a meta-commentary on the actions of the Protagonist and the futility of the

\textsuperscript{51} Writing on Games, “NieR Replicant’s New Secret is Truly Special (SPOILER/ENDING E ANALYSIS),” April 29th, 2021, https://youtu.be/TnH6CdFXaNQ
\textsuperscript{52} Keigo Hoashi, et al. NieR Gestalt… Piano Collection, 78-84.
journey as a whole – while it is only partially acknowledged in-game, Yonah is still suffering from the effects of the Black Scrawl, and with endings C or D inevitably following the events of ending A, the futility of the player’s quest becomes ever more apparent. The lack of Yonah’s voice for such a significant stretch of the game’s narrative grants “Ashes of Dreams” a uniquely powerful impact – even if other characters’ themes show up far more often in Replicant, the choice to grant Yonah the only lyrics in discreet languages functions as a sort of retroactive voice, giving her the literal last words of the game for the player to reflect upon.

Closing Words (Have We Been Fighting in Vain?)

In analyzing the symbolic significance of the voice to character-based leitmotifs, I have left behind an important question: Where does this ethereal voice reside within the diegesis? In short, it is ambiguous. The “Devola” and “Hollow Dreams” variants of “Song of the Ancients” are the only instances of explicitly diegetic music – and even then, there is some ambiguity on the latter front, where Devola and Popola are doubtless singing within the scene, but the piano and percussion backing is nowhere to be seen. Musically, a piano bar is evoked by the variant (as fits with the twins singing in a tavern), but only a few of the track’s layers are diegetically possible. This in tandem with the perpetually present guitar of the “Devola” variant (regardless of the player’s spatial relationship to her), leaves the theme questionable in its diegesis: Devola’s guitar is acousmatic, her tuneful singing is not.

As discussed in Chapter 1, the instrumentation of many tracks lends a pastoral tone to much of 1.22’s music, using instruments that often fit within the setting (guitar, percussion, and strings). While the instrumental music is not diegetic, it nonetheless evokes a sense of diegesis, and the blurred lines between character and leitmotivic voice further add to this ambiguity. The “fantastical gap” seems a fairly sensible location to place much of the soundtrack in – however,
in Robynn Stillwell’s breakdown of the topic, the fantastical gap is framed as a much more transitory space, which becomes difficult to reconcile with the relatively unchanging position of music within the soundtrack throughout the title. One of the only truly distinct instances of this occurs in Shadowlord’s castle with the theme “Dance of the Evanescent,” which is initially set up by Emil’s comment about hearing a waltz coming from the next room, but rapidly shifts away from diegesis as the track grows increasingly disjunct and electronically manipulated. Few other tracks demonstrate this ready traversal of the fantastical gap, but this ambiguous place forms a suitable home for it nonetheless.

It is perhaps best argued that the voice itself is what occupies the fantastical gap – it bridges character and musical leitmotif in an inescapable fashion, constantly fluctuating. The only characters to literally sing in Replicant are Devola and Popola, but through the shared elements of Chaos Language and the voice’s centrality, the implication that their nonsensical song tells a story easily maps to the remainder of the soundtrack. The literal narrative and voices of the characters are near-inextricably linked from their soundtrack counterparts, something that grows ever more apparent in successive replays – as does the role of particular leitmotifs, and certain voices denied to the player in their first playthrough of the title.

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CHAPTER 3
OTHER VOICES AND RECONTEXTUALIZATION IN NIER

Going Back Around Again

NieR’s most famous narrative trick is doubtless its recontextualizing of events through multiple playthroughs, something that upends the traditional notion of endings. Alexandre Paquet has discussed the impact of this on the series’ narrative, enabling the games to challenge the player’s perception of the game’s events by experiencing them over again, given new agency in participating and better understanding the events of their first playthrough, using Route A’s macabre endgame twists as a foundation for what could be termed the “true” story of NieR. The events of the narrative (and the music behind it) are largely unaltered, but the renewed context given by Routes B/C/D lends a remarkable new atmosphere.

When the player first steps back out into the Northern Plains and begins fighting Shades once more, the joyous strains of “Hills of Radiant Wind” instantly take on a darkly ironic air – the player now knows that these Shades are people like the Protagonist, characters also struggling to survive in this broken world. What was once standard RPG/hack’n’slash experience point grinding has now become a senseless massacre with an ironically joyous musical backdrop, one that the player must choose to participate in once more in order to experience the Shades’ side of the narrative. This dramatic irony has become one of the series’ main selling points, with

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the ethical dilemma of repeating the tragic events time and again receiving significant critical and scholarly acclaim.\textsuperscript{55}

The dramatic irony of the post-Ending-A routes is deeply enhanced by \textit{Replicant}’s music – as discussed earlier, the knowledge of Devola and Popola’s upcoming betrayal adds a layer of tension to the formerly relaxing and pastoral “Song of the Ancients” strain running throughout the village. As the player repeatedly loops through the second half of the game, the overall musical collage happens again and again. If they use the common trick of save scumming for endings C/D (wherein the player creates a backup of their save file immediately before Shadowlord’s Castle to play through the branching path back to back), the final act of the game in the Shadowlord’s Castle can create a sort of “macro loop” of the musical montage that occurs in this sequence (with the key difference of alternate “Ashes of Dreams” variants).

In these repeated runs, a player can grow to anticipate the placement and arrival of leitmotifs – for example, Emil’s destruction of the Aerie will always be punctuated with the strains of “Sacrifice.” This does not guarantee an overall sameness, however – when a player encounters a new “novel” segment or contextualizing cutscene unique to Routes B/C/D, they can be surprised with new contexts for themes. These small subversions (and the inevitability of tragic events) are a hallmark of the \textit{NieR} experience, and something Taro deliberately works to plant in most of his titles.\textsuperscript{56}

This recontextualization and dramatic irony found in the soundtrack extends to the diegetic voice as well. While common overworld enemies do not receive this treatment, newly subtitled grunts/growls of the Shades haunt the player in significant story beats, reminding them of the unknowing massacres the Protagonist is participating in. Route B grants the Shades a new voice, and while this voice lacks a connection to the soundtrack, the desperate cries of a parental Shade during the slaughter of their children is certain to imprint on a player’s mind as firmly as any musical theme. Stefan Greenfield-Casas has highlighted the screams of Automata’s Simone (to be discussed shortly) as a vital signifier of the existential crisis haunting her character – something that we see even as far back as the distorted, ethereal screams of Replicant’s Shades.57

One Shade is granted an audible voice, however: Kainé’s, a bloodthirsty and maniacal entity by the name of Tyrann. At several points in Route A, Kainé talks to Tyrann without the player being aware of his presence – entering the Lost Shrine in Route B reveals him, as he begins somewhat obnoxious commentary on the Shrine’s role as a haven for damaged Shades. Tyrann’s presence in the narrative was deliberately withheld from the player, a joyous spectator to the bloodshed.

Through the lens of Kainé and Tyrann, the player is given a new view of the game’s events and the inner lives of its characters through the medium of the voice (it can be inferred that Route B lets us “hear” the Shades through their perspective). While Tyrann’s presence is only unveiled diegetically after the “Kainé’s Dreams” novel, the realization that another character has been observing the events of the title from a similar spectator/participator standpoint as the player likely comes as a shock to many. As a disembodied voice, Tyrann is

arguably as literal a representation of Chion’s “all seeing” acoustmère as one can get, spectator, commentator, “player” of Kainé akin to how we play the Protagonist.58

Recontextualization is vital to NieR’s narrative, and the voice is often a key focus in that aspect of it. Jennifer Smith has discussed several instances of the voice/soundtrack’s evolving context on the micro-level in her thesis “Worldbuilding Voices,” but due to NieR’s narrative structure, this also occurs on the macro-level in both Replicant and Automata.59 In addition to the revealed voices of the Shades, additional sequences from Emil and Kainé’s perspective grant the characters a depth that was not initially revealed in the first playthrough – perhaps representative of the Protagonist/player’s singlemindedness in their crusade against the Shades. There is almost no thought given to the impact this brutal war has on the lives of the Protagonist’s found family, something Route B makes clear from the very beginning. The first major instance of recontextualizing occurs the moment a player begins Route B, which presents them with a lengthy “novel” sequence set inside Kainé’s mind during her petrification.

Like other novel sequences, the four chapters of “Kainé’s Dream” serve as text adventures collaging together a myriad of themes from elsewhere in the game. Most notable among them is “Kainé – Escape” briefly playing after her grandmother rescues her from some youths who had threatened her. In this moment, one of the first instances of love and support she has experienced, her theme is writ larger than ever before. As her life with her grandma is further expounded, the strength of that initial bond is further emphasized in the succeeding passages of the novel, even if we already know that this story must end in tragedy. The interiority given to

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58 Michel Chion, The Voice in Cinema, 18-23.
Kainé by this sequence is substantial – lending new insight that was deliberately withheld in the first run of the game, something that applies to friend and foe alike in Route B.

**The Little Mermaid and Her Beautiful Song**

1.22’s most substantial addition to the narrative of *Replicant* (apart from ending E) is doubtless the “Little Mermaid” sequence – taking place in the second half of the game, this battle with an incomprehensibly massive kaiju Shade in the ruins of a wrecked ship was another piece of planned content that was unable to be implemented in the original release, instead included as “The Little Mermaid” short story in the companion book *Grimoire NieR*. The sequence features a brand-new level, two leitmotivic tracks for the Shade Louise, and some of the most striking use of the diegetic voice in the series to date. “The Little Mermaid” is an excellent highlight of *NieR*’s recontextualizing narrative tricks in microcosm, and its central medium is related through the voice.

In Route A, the party come across the ruins of a large seafaring vessel while tracking down a missing ferryman, and while exploring the wreckage find themselves on the trail of a ghostly young girl. After discovering the corpse of the missing ferryman and many others in the wreckage, as well as working out the ship’s gruesome history as a slaving vessel, the girl is eventually revealed to be a massively powerful Shade, who the party take on in combat. The boss fight features the track “Fleeting Words – Outsider,” which is a massive choir and orchestra score on a similar cataclysmic scale to “The Dark Colossus Destroys All.” Pushing themselves to

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60 Playstation Blog. “How The Little Mermaid Chapter was created for Nier Replicant,” [https://blog.playstation.com/2021/12/22/how-the-little-mermaid-chapter-was-created-for-nier-replicant/](https://blog.playstation.com/2021/12/22/how-the-little-mermaid-chapter-was-created-for-nier-replicant/)
their limit, the party defeat the Shade, and the remaining key hunt that occupies the second half plays out as in the original release.

Route B performs its usual trick of narrative recontextualization – when the hunt for the ferryman begins anew, the Shade’s story is told in montage. As a massive, kaiju-like Shade, she lacked a corresponding Replicant body, but desired nothing more than to be human. Due to the immense power she held, she could imitate the form of a young girl while taking refuge in the wrecked ship to avoid the burning light of the sun. Seafront’s postman investigates the wreckage and discovers the Shade in her human form, doing his best to care for her, naming her Louise. The two grow close, with the postman teaching her a song – that even in its fragmentary and somewhat humorous treatment, is immediately recognizable as the “Fleeting Words” motif. As the player explores the ship once more, these scenes are further elaborated on, showing Louise’s desire to be a normal human and live a life in Seafront with the postman before she is discovered by the party and forced to defend herself. Her voice is as distorted and howling as any other Shade, but she attempts to sing regardless.

Route B features another layer that lends to the dramatic irony and tragedy of the player experience – as “Fleeting Words” explodes onto the soundscape once again, significance of Louise’s voice is brought to the fore, with the kaiju-Shade’s moans and howls layered in with an actual human voice, audible to the player and (perhaps) Kainé. The significance of “Fleeting Words” is further noted by Tyrann, who comments derisively on Louise’s attempts to sing. The mixing of Louise’s ideal human voice is further intensified in Route C/D, which removes the Shade element entirely, the “little mermaid” granted a purely human voice at last. The player and

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Kainé are forced to confront her desire to be human/to be able to communicate, with Route C offering an alternate ending to the sequence, where Kainé finds a (poorly written) letter from Louise to the postman; ultimately the only true words she was ever able to speak to him. The player is denied access to these words, though Kainé does deliver the letter, causing the postman to break down in tears.

This is the game’s most literal instance of Route B-D’s recontextualizing and granting a character a voice – Louise is the only Shade to receive a voice-acted performance (even the Shadowlord receives only subtitles), and the character of her narrative lends itself to this literal treatment of “the little mermaid” and her voice. This evolving role of her voice (and her leitmotif) is something that unfolds largely for the player, as does nearly every change that appears in the post-Route-A playthroughs. Louise’s story is also one of many narrative parallels between Replicant and Automata, with the structure as it appears in 1.22 doubtless taking cues from the character of Simone in Automata.

Automata’s boss fight with the machine Simone carries numerous parallels: Simone is consciously referenced as singing, blurring the lines of diegesis in her initial appearance. Simone sings a D5 before screaming, firmly establishing the tonal center of her boss track “A Beautiful Song,” which layers in and out, blending Simone’s diegetic voice with the non-diegetic music.62 In Route B of Automata, the machine’s real desires are unveiled, with Simone having fallen in love with another machine named Jean-Paul and having slowly attempted to alter her own form an attempt to make Jean-Paul see her as beautiful, with a novel-segment repeatedly begging for him to “look my way.” This recontextualizes her screams; she dreamed of beauty, and was

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reduced by the struggle to be loved into something monstrous, a layer of the game’s commentary on the monstrosity inherent in human nature. As Greenfield-Casas describes: “it is in Simone’s scream, in her cry, in her voice that the existential philosophy that permeates the game is first reckoned.”

Similar to the howls of the Shades (most noticeably in the Shadowlord’s desperate scream after his Yonah’s death), the recontextualized tragedy is anticipated through the voice and made explicit in subsequent playthroughs.

Simone and Louise are both perceived as monstrous in Route A, with Simone’s decorating her body with androids and Louise having consumed humans in an attempt to be like them. Both of their tragic stories are retold in the boss fights in the later routes, with each of them desperately desiring a connection: Simone a romantic connection, Louise wanting to live as the postman’s daughter. Both characters sing their “beautiful songs” in tandem with their pleas to live normal lives, to have a connection with someone.

Both characters are denied this connection, of course – the dramatic irony and tragedy of post-Route-A playthroughs is rooted in this recontextualizing of the initial story while the events play out regardless. Much like the post-game experience of “Ashes of Dreams,” these are elements of the story that are known to the player (with only Kainé gaining understanding through the witness and commentary of Tyrann). Even the subtitles of the Shades give this experience, reminding the player that amidst their otherworldly noises, they had voices and feelings every bit as much as the principal characters. Louise and Simone both wanted to sing for the ones they loved… but they sing for us alone.

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64 Greenfield-Casas, “The Lament[S] of the (Post)Human.”
Mechanical Voices and Dreams of Escape

While the area is somewhat foreboding, the Junk Heap is one of the most substantial and oft-visited areas in Replicant – prominently featuring in both halves of Route A, as well as being the place where the Protagonist upgrades weaponry. The background theme “The Wretched Automatons” is thus (alongside “Hills of Radiant Wind”) likely one of the most prominent tracks that a player will encounter during their repeated playthroughs. While the track is a noticeable timbral departure from its companions, with prominent metallic percussion and distorted vocal synths, Emi Evans’ voice remains prominent, reassuringly lyrical against the claustrophobic and heavily mechanical hallways of The Junk Heap (in addition to its striking

The primary enemies in this area are not Shades, but security robots with varying degrees of anthropomorphism. In the second half (and refought in Routes B/C/D), a massive humanoid robot named P-33 is fought to obtain one of the keys to the Shadowlord’s castle. As is customary for the latter routes, P-33 is revealed to have obtained a certain degree of sentience, desiring to protect a young Child Shade from what it correctly perceived as intruders (the Protagonist and co.). The boss fight itself is accompanied by “Dark Colossus Destroys All” in P-33’s attempt to escape the confines of the Junk Heap, but this is linked only to the dramatic escalation of the fight’s intensity. While “The Wretched Automatons” is not explicitly linked to P-33 or his voice, I think its warm and ethereal nature readily link to P-33’s protective instincts that become revealed through Route B.

As the player repeatedly navigates the mazelike corridors (either for narrative or sidequests), the music’s lush harmonies and gentle melody paint a portrait of a warm, inviting place, perhaps not for the party, but as the added Route B cutscenes illustrate, certainly for P-33 and the Shade he has chosen to protect. This indirect linking of the human voice on the
soundtrack to what are initially portrayed as mechanical monstrosities is something that would be drawn into much more direct focus in Automata, where machines are granted distinct diegetic voices, as well as voices on the soundtrack itself.65 Like “Hills of Radiant Wind,” “Wretched Automatons” lends a constant and deeply human undercurrent to the player’s time in the Junk Heap, something that is enhanced through P-33’s recontextualized vocalizations in subsequent playthroughs.

“Event Leitmotif” and Inconsistencies

Replicant’s soundtrack is primarily driven through character and area themes, but several tracks foreshadow the approach taken in Automata, where their appearances are focused around recurring moods and tones throughout given scenes.66 The tracks “Dispossession” and “This Dream” are consistent recurring themes that lack a distinct link with any characters or areas, and as previously mentioned, Emil and Kainé’s theme make several appearances that are detached from their usual role in the story. One of the most prominently reused themes is “Dark Colossus,” which appears in the battles with the Wolf Shade, P-33, and the eventual climactic fight with Kainé’s Shade at the end of routes C/D. These inconsistencies can largely be attributed to the original release’s low budget/time crunch – much like the reused areas between the first and second half of Route A, there was not time to produce unique tracks for every single boss.

As a result of this, leitmotifs are frequently repurposed, and this can weaken the link with the voice I’ve discussed throughout chapters 2 and 3. “Dark Colossus” becomes less of a cataclysmic singularity in the soundtrack and more an overall signifier of desperation and

65 Smith, “Worldbuilding Voices,” 103-104.
destruction. “Emil – Sacrifice” occasionally shifts from being explicitly linked with the character’s pain and voice to an overall signifier of tragedy. *1.22* ultimately remains faithful to the original’s soundscape, and does not attempt to substitute these instances with new music. Given the quantity of music to draw from, reuse of themes was near-inevitable for a game of *Replicant*’s scope, so while these are noteworthy inconsistencies I still believe my reading is effective regardless. The voice’s centrality to the music and its significance in the narratives of both *NieR* titles is near-inarguable, whether it is the literal voices of characters or broader signifiers in the soundtrack.

*NieR*’s original release is not a perfect game or work of art – but it creates an incredibly compelling musical portrayal of the characters and the world they inhabit on an ultimately limited musical budget, and *1.22*’s faithfulness to that is commendable in an era of remasters and remakes that can sometimes drastically shift the sonic palette of an original title (for example, the 2020 remake of *Demon’s Souls* was met with controversy from fans following its substantial alterations to the original’s music, attempting to update the rather understated original to something more in line with its bombastic musical successors in the *Dark Souls* trilogy). In *1.22*, as in the original release, leitmotifs are still placed for maximum dramatic effectiveness, and even if one may tire of hearing Emil’s theme as accompaniment to most late-game tragedies, the impact it carries in the moment of his “death” is substantial regardless.

While *1.22*’s soundtrack is incredibly faithful to the original, even with the limitations that entails, there are several sequences where it is able to shine and transcend those limitations. Louise’s story (originally cut for budget) is one such sequence, with a newly composed theme that allows her to stand out from the musical fold. This is not the most substantial addition to the
soundtrack, however: 1.22 restores one more substantial piece of cut story, and in doing so, serves as a narrative/musical summation of almost everything in the NieR toolkit.

There is no diegetic indication of this addition – the player may only become clued into its existence from extradiegetic info such as Playstation Trophies/Steam achievements (or perhaps online discussion). The closest thing to a diegetic hint at this narrative element is contained in “Ashes of Dreams” – in Endings A-C, a pattern is established for varied vocal and instrumental arrangements of this theme (ex: the French-language variation is set for piano, string quartet, and vocal, the German for piano, chamber winds, and voice).

Ending D (in addition to the deletion of the player’s save data), breaks another substantial pattern established by the game. Kainé and Yonah find a Lunar Tear flower gifted to Kainé by the Protagonist. As Kainé reflects on her intangible sense of loss with the words “It’s like I just found something special… something very special…,” a music box playing Yonah’s theme begins to play into the credits. Unlike previous endings, the instrumentals are never joined by a voice: the music box slowly winds down until it fades into nothingness, leaving several minutes of credits to be accompanied by nothing more than faint nature noises. This variant (“Ashes of Dreams – Lost”) continues a gentle ritardando and cuts off on a predominant chord, deliberately breaking any sense of closure the player may have gotten from the music (see Figure 16).

![Figure 16. Transcription of the final incomplete phrase of “Ashes of Dreams – Lost.”](image-url)
The recontextualizing approach to narrative and musical theme places *NieR* at odds with most of its contemporaries – other games might give players the choice to stop the tragic events from playing out, and other soundtracks might opt for sophisticated musical transformation of their distinct leitmotifs. Instead, we experience these events and themes repeatedly, but gaining new familiarity and understanding of all their respective aspects, our initial perceptions constantly subverted in the repeated playthroughs. Nowhere is this more evident than in *1.22*’s most hidden piece of narrative content, the brand-new “Ending E.”
CHAPTER 4
ENDING E AND CLOSING CYCLES

After the player chooses ending D and sacrifices the Protagonist’s existence/their save data for ending D, the sense of finality is immense, with the only record of the player’s time with the game being a single Lunar Tear that graces the formerly blank title screen. This is where the original release of NieR ends, but in 1.22, if the player chooses to restart the game from the beginning with a new character, something interesting happens.

Where Kainé normally joins the Protagonist (after the Hook fight), the narrative interrupts itself. The Protagonist’s pleas for Kainé to go on living disappear, and Kainé awakens from a nightmare, with the previous events framed as a dream. This is where Ending E begins, taking place three years after Ending D. Despite her victory against the Shadowlord, Kainé’s life has not improved. Haunted by near-recollections of the Protagonist and mourning Emil’s sacrifice, she remains an outcast from her fellow humans and spends most of her time killing what few Shades remain after the Shadowlord’s death, subverting even Ending D’s finality. In the moment, the Protagonist’s sacrifice may have seemed the better choice for the player, but it deprived Kainé of the only solace she had found in the world: her chosen family.

The player takes control of her, reigniting the gameplay loop of battling Shades on the Northern Plains, now deprived of the companionship (and magic) of the Protagonist, Weiss, and Emil. Similarly to Automata’s route C/D, the bombastic final act of prior routes has ended nothing. Eventually Kainé is directed to one of the game’s Forest of Myth, where the tone shifts: the inhabitants have all been massacred by machines, with the automatons threatening to spill out

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across the lands in which *NieR* takes place. The pastoral setting gives way to nightmarish Giger-esque as Kainé enters the “Memory Tree” at the center of the village, where she is confronted by two AIs responsible for overseeing Project Gestalt.68

This is where Ending E’s first original track beings, with an immediate and striking sonic break from *Replicant*’s usual soundscape. “*Analogous Memories*” opens with sharp Bulgarian choir and pitched percussion ostinatos, detaching us from the lush harmonies and harkening back to the sonorities of *Automata* and the track “*Alien Manifestation*.“ The voice remains central, but the use of Bulgarian choir sonorities are strongly linked with the sharp and glitchy voices of the AIs, unlinking the music from Kainé’s human experience. The metallic percussive backdrop is also largely foreign to *Replicant*’s soundscape, with its closet link residing in the Junk Heap’s “Wretched Automatons.”

The soundscape is a terrifying break from *Replicant*’s musical aesthetic, as Kainé first fights off a bizarre, amalgamated machine, and then numerous machine-like clones of herself that the AIs create attempting to punish her for the death of the Shadowlord and the failure of Project Gestalt. The scenery and music are such a sharp departure from *Replicant*’s aesthetic that the sequence is liable to appear alien to someone who has not also played *Automata*. For players of the 2017 game, the shared voice actors between the AIs and 2B/9S may be an additional unsettling element – *Automata*’s events remain almost 10,000 years in the future from this point, but the foundation for that game’s tragic cycle is already being established.

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68 The Memory Tree was a supposedly magical part of *Replicant*’s setting, ostensibly containing memories of all that had happened to the world. Ending E recontextualizes it as a computer driving Project Gestalt.
As Kainé is on the verge of being overwhelmed by her machine clones, Emil appears out of the blue to save her, triumphantly accompanied by the “Karma” variant of his theme. The reassertion of the Replicant soundscape in the face of the horrific setting brilliantly resets the player’s mood – not only are they likely happy about Emil’s return, but the emphatic restatement of his theme in tandem is a wonderful contrast from the last time we saw him, frightened and alone in the dark.

Another significant aspect of this track’s reappearance is its activation by Emil’s voice: It does not start when he first appears onscreen but only after he has spoken and asserted that yes, he is really here. This grants his voice an even deeper link with this theme, and the brief triumph of Replicant’s timbral aesthetic in the face of the overbearing foreshadowing of Automata’s machine-driven future is an incredibly striking musical moment. Emil’s vocal activation of the soundtrack harkens back (forward?) to Simone’s appearance in Automata and of the voice being used as bridge between diegetic events and the non-diegetic soundtrack.

Automata’s foreshadowed aesthetic grows ever more prominent, as Kainé and Emil move together into a bizarre “copied” model of the Shadowlord’s Castle, as the AIs running the show
(and reading their memories) recreate the location of a traumatic point in both their histories. It is in this uncanny copied model that another major recontextualization of a prior theme occurs: In the model of the Shadowlord’s boss arena, a bizarre box that supposedly contains Kainé’s memories can be attacked by the player, which sparks the next musical sequence. A music box begins playing Shadowlord’s theme, initiating a sequence that reverses the progression of Shadowlord’s death music, adding choir and full orchestra. This scene recontextualizes “Shadowlord,” altering it from a pure character theme and much more explicitly linking it to the struggle to save one that you love – throughout this sequence, Kainé grows more frustrated as the music builds, finally destroying the box in tandem with the climax of “Shadowlord.”

Following the memory box’s destruction, Kainé is transported to a surreal digital realm that is a collage of spaces seen throughout Replicant (most notably the Aerie, accompanied by “Cold Steel Coffin”), framed in the context of Automata’s digital environments. The AIs continue to taunt her, making her come face to face with fragmented memories and refight previous boss encounters, digging ever deeper into Kainé’s past until they find her “worst memory.” A spectral apparition of Hook appears, and with it, the new track “Grandma – Reunion.” Building on the militaristic snare of “Cold Steel Coffin,” “Reunion” is a new arrangement presented with full choir and massive orchestral backing – the weight of Kainé’s past is inescapable. “Reunion” borrows elements from both the original track and Automata’s arrangement (“Grandma – Destruction”), building on the slow tempo and intense triplet ostinatos of the original but with the cataclysmic dynamism of “Destruction.” With this musical backdrop, Kainé’s confrontation with her most traumatic memories ends with her easily overpowered, unable to meaningfully harm the apparition Hook.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hook Final Phase:</th>
<th>“Grandma”</th>
<th>Discussed in detail earlier.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hook’s Defeat:</td>
<td>“Kainé – Salvation”</td>
<td>See above.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kainé’s awakening/return to battle:</td>
<td>“Dispossession” / “Hills of Radiant Wind”</td>
<td>Emphasizes the lack of change.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journey to Forest of Myth/Heart of the Memory Tree:</td>
<td>“Snow in Summer” / “This Dream”</td>
<td>“SiS” only utilizes a noisy ambient layer, “This Dream” is unchanged.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Battle with Machines:</td>
<td>“Analogous Memories”</td>
<td>As discussed, a sharp deviation from Replicant’s soundscape.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital Construct:</td>
<td>“Repose”</td>
<td>Also appears at several points to provide ambience in Automata, further strengthening the link between the titles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destroying the key:</td>
<td>“Shadowlord”</td>
<td>Firmly asserting the theme as part of the struggle to save the one you love.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kainé’s memories:</td>
<td>“Cold Steel Coffin”</td>
<td>Further emphasizes Kainé’s trauma from her time in the Aerie.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hook returns:</td>
<td>“Grandma – Reunion”</td>
<td>Cataclysmic variation of the theme the sequence began with.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 18. Musical graph of ending E up to Kainé’s failure against the apparition Hook. New tracks marked in bold.

A final “novel” sequence follows, accompanied by “Dispossession” and an instrumental treatment of “Shadowlord’s Castle.” In the novel, Kainé experiences a dream of her grandmother and her life in The Aerie, until the people around her begin dying and her world dissolves into ash. In the emptiness, Kainé finds herself about to give up, until a brief echo of Grimoire Weiss rings out, reminding her that she still has someone to live for – and someone she can save… Here we see another instance of the voice’s centrality: In an otherwise instrumental soundscape (indeed, silent by the ending), it is Weiss’s voice that bring Kainé back from the brink.

Awakening back into the nightmarish digital confrontation, Kainé is about to be crushed akin to how Hook murdered her grandmother, but a bolt of magic impales it, temporarily
incapacitating the beast. Weiss’s consciousness has joined her in the digital world, and with Kainé’s remembrance of her friend, the musical trauma of “Grandma – Reunion” is overwritten, as “Kainé – Escape” plays in full for the first time in the game. With 4-part backing vocals and bombastic orchestral accompaniment, this treatment of Kainé’s theme is raucous and joyful, an utter contrast to “Salvation’s” gentle lyricism.

The appearance of “Kainé – Escape” as a robust full orchestral variant that rebuffs the despairing tone of “Grandma / Reunion” serves as an excellent highlight of NieR’s cyclic deployment of music: The opening Hook fight spotlights “Grandma” and “Kainé / Salvation” before being interrupted by Ending E, which closes with variants of both those tracks. This is an excellent example in microcosm of how NieR places tracks, which often serve to bookend sequences on either the micro or macro level (something we see explored much more thoroughly in Automata). With the aid of Weiss’s magic, Kainé rapidly overwhelms Hook (further emphasizing the strength her found family gave her during their time together), and as she grows more determined, the world created by the AIs is overwritten – with Hook’s death, the AIs are destroyed, with one crying out that they “hear a song.” This is not only a reference to Taro’s earlier game Drakengard 3 and its diegetic “Songs” for the principal antagonists and main characters, but subtly implies that even if Kainé herself is not singing, “Escape” and its vocals form part of her experience. This link between the diegetic/musical vocals is only further emphasized in the immediately succeeding sequence.

After the AIs are destroyed, the secret they were hiding is revealed: The Memory Tree contains the only remaining vestiges of the Protagonist’s existence, as it was a manufacturing

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69 This (in tandem with the appearance of “Kainé – Escape”) harkens back to when the track was last heard, in her dreams following the rescue by her grandmother.
70 Access Games, Drakengard 3, Square Enix 2013.
device for Replicants and contains records of the Protagonist’s encounters with it from years prior. A fragmentary echo of the Protagonist’s voice is heard telling Kainé to not risk her life to save him, but this is immediately rebuffed in her characteristically vulgar fashion. During this monologue (reprimanding the Protagonist for leaving her behind, affirming that she is the only one who gets to decide what her life means to her), the vocals of “Escape” fade out to center Kainé’s voice, linking the musical/diegetic vocals even more deeply.

The climactic music fades away, as Kainé/the player are given a choice to rescue “the one you cherish.” Choosing “Yes” returns the lost save data from a player’s first playthrough, and gives the player the final ending, where the Memory Tree blossoms into a massive flower, having rebirthed the Protagonist at the age Kainé met him, as Emil and Kainé reflect on how even though their world is ending, they will always fight for it and the people they love, a sort of thematic summation of the NieR franchise’s themes to date.71 Throughout Ending E, we see nearly every trick in NieR’s musical toolbox utilized – its handling of established vocal leitmotif, the recontextualization of existing themes, altering the soundscape through subtle orchestration shifts, and the extreme density of its thematic collaging all make it a brilliant highlight of NieR’s musical approaches.

While it is a comparatively brief sequence, on average lasting only an hour or so, the density of story beats and its musical accompaniment are unparalleled anywhere else in the series (indeed, I am hard pressed to think of any other sequences in games that rival it musically). Much as Ending E serves as a narrative upheaval to the tragic finality of Ending D, the music serves as an affirmation of its characters – “Karma” and “Escape” musically overwhelm

71 Writing on Games, “NieR Replicant’s New Secret is Truly Special (SPOILER/ENDING E ANALYSIS),” April 29th, 2021, https://youtu.be/TnH6CdFXaNQ
“Analogous Memories” and “Grandma – Reunion” just as Emil and Kainé triumph against the machines and Hook, giving these characters the player has likely grown to love the ending they might dream of for them.

![Figure 19. Kainé clutching the Protagonist at the center of the flower in Ending E.](image)

Ending E sets itself apart from prior instances of story-driven musical collaging in *Replicant* – while Shadowlord’s Castle is similarly dense, its recontextualized motifs (“Song of the Ancients,” “Shadowlord’s Castle,” and “Ashes of Dreams”) contribute to an atmosphere of despair, whereas Ending E further recontextualizes and subverts player expectations: From beginning with the horror of the machine massacre to ending with Kainé’s triumph, the sequence upends the game’s penchant for tragic dramatic irony while not deviating from the game’s established musical approach. It serves as a microcosmic example of the musical collage and the deep link the soundtrack carries to character voice, while subverting all that a player may have come to expect from *Replicant*’s grim tone.
CONCLUSION

The soundtrack to the *NieR* duology does not display many of the typical devices associated with narrative music – leitmotivic transformation is near absent (with typical tools such as fragmentation, inversion, and retrograde almost nowhere to be found), and themes are regularly repurposed and recontextualized as needed. Despite this, the music demonstrates extreme depth in its interaction with the games, flowing in and out of the diegesis, perpetually recontextualizing itself alongside the narrative’s recontextualized events. The relationship between the character’s voices and relevant leitmotifs is only further developed from *Replicant* to *Automata*, even with the latter’s shift away from character-based leitmotif.

The diegetic ambiguity of vocals in the series only continues to complexify when examining its predecessor series, *Drakengard*, and its mysterious Intoners (and the catalyst for *NieR*’s events in *Drakengard I*’s final joke ending, where a demonic entity’s song curses humanity and forces the creation of Project Gestalt). Song is a crucial aspect of Yoko Taro’s output in the narrative/sonic experience of the player, and the nuances of its role are beyond the scope of this thesis. I have only been able to touch on moments where the diegetic voice serves as a musical activator for an immediately succeeding musical texture, or the use of Bulgarian choir as a signifier of the posthuman (prevalent throughout *Automata* and Ending E).

This is to say nothing of *Automata*’s Ending E, which takes the musical voice and uses it as a symbol of the player base. In sum, there remains a great deal of analysis to still be done on *Replicant* and *Automata*’s music and their complex relationship with the human voice, and that is

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72 Briefly: The playable credits of *Automata*’s Ending E are accompanied by increasingly layered instrumental and vocal layers, with a choir being added upon a player’s acceptance of help from those who sacrificed their save data in order to help others make it through the otherwise near-impossible bullet hell.
before touching on titles linked to it such as *Drakengard* and the spin-off mobile game *NieR:Reincarnation*. Within the mainline duology, narrative and music echo one another in myriad ways, as the mistakes of the past are repeated again and again. Christopher Greene’s analysis makes for an excellent foundation of the musical echoing, but there is much more room for analyzing the narrative interrelation between the two titles – particularly keeping in mind Ending E’s metatextual allusions to *Automata*.

I also believe the foundation I have set for analysis of vocal leitmotif and its link to characters can be applied to other titles – see the theme songs for characters in *Devil May Cry 5* and *Bayonetta*’s triumphant “Climax Mixes,” for example. The human voice has been a complex object in the games medium since some of its earliest appearances, and vocal leitmotif has a rich place in the history of games music (see for example, *Final Fantasy VI*’s iconic opera sequence that later becomes a non-diegetic character theme).73 The ambiguous diegesis encountered in *NieR* is far from the only example of this transformation of the voice in games, and this topic deserves significantly more analysis.

Ultimately, I argue that in these narratives about cycles of violence and the struggle to fix the mistakes of the past, that the musical voice serves above all as humanizing link to the characters. From its earliest instances subverting Kainé’s uncouth attitude, to the melancholy irony hearing Devola sing after starting Route B, Okabe and Evans’ sad songs sympathize with these broken people and lend them depth and humanity long before the narrative begins its recontextualizing spiral. The ecstatic affirmation of Kainé’s agency in the face of her trauma displayed by Ending E is a remarkable use of leitmotif, as the musical and diegetic voice literally

73 Square Enix, *Final Fantasy VI* Pixel Remaster, Square Enix 2022.
drown out all the entities who would oppose her until all that remains are her chosen family, a family that she *will not let us take from her* ever again.

The player is constantly interrogated by the *NieR* games about the morality of their actions, directly and indirectly, but the final choice of each game centers around giving of yourself so that these fictional characters have a *chance* to find happiness in this otherwise doomed world. “Ashes of Dreams” will forever remind the player of the grand futility of the game’s events, but Kainé and Emil’s words confront this:

> “Our journey may have been meaningless…

> “Our past may have been a mistake.”

> “But we’re not going back.”

> “Even if this world comes to an end.”

> “Because this… this is the world with the people we cherish.”
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