

A large, stylized number '2023' is the central focus, rendered in a thick, black, serif font. The background is a light beige color, decorated with white fireworks and sparkles. The fireworks are depicted as radiating lines of varying lengths, some with small circles at their ends, suggesting sparks or falling embers. The overall aesthetic is clean and celebratory.

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The
Firework
Journal

*A monthly publication for creative and critical writing from students at the
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EDITOR'S NOTE

What is the value of a humanities education? Unlike some academic paths, it does not promise a specific job wrapped with a clean bow. One must *market* themselves, hoping to boil down their education to a nice set of skills applicable to the real world. The capacity to write succinctly, to summarize vast quantities of information – this is the recipe by which we live – for what immediate value does a law firm hold for an exploration of suffering in the Faerie Queene, or for a poem describing one's love of coffee? Such imposed conditions on the value of our chosen education threaten to pervade the very expression of our writing, rendering a work's political and economic potential the only viable means of expression. Always secondary, we justify our existence through the microscope of theories that have little to do with arts-based expression at all. Our eyes become microscopes, turning a useful tool into a perverse aberration as we rush to become scientific.

But what is the answer then? Art for Art's sake? Such a statement undercuts the worth of art in a fashion just as intolerable as any political or scientific excuse produced today. As Nietzsche says:

When one has excluded from art the purpose of moral preaching and human improvement it by no means follows that art is completely purposeless, goalless, meaningless, in short *l'art pour l'art* – a snake biting its own tail. . . Art is the great stimulus to life. (*TI*: “Expeditions of an Untimely Man 25)

To become overflowed with the raw passions of life's torrential depths, to catch a glimpse of the glimmering beauty beneath the ocean's surface, to communicate not because one can, but because one must – it is this fundamental drive to life which fuels all literary criticism and art. The excitement and wonder that permeates your being as you become lost in a poem, in writing a poem, and then— the joy of sharing it with another. Creative and critical writing was not born to die in the classroom, but to inspire life in the eyes of every onlooker blessed to catch a glimpse. The aim of this journal is to provide space for fireworks such as these, the ideas that consumed our very own university students. Ranging from explorations of growing up ‘Berta, to a conversation between guards in a crumbling world, and to an examination of morality in the digital junk-scape of *NieR Replicant*, it is with the utmost pride that we present our very first issue.

So, without further ado, thank you for reading and enjoy!

— John Rawlek, *Co-Founder and Editor*

Playing the Hero: Nier and Moral Dilemmas in an Interactive Space

Cameron O'Bear

NieR Replicant (2021) from director Yoko Taro is a game that— at its surface— bears many of the trappings of a traditional hero's-journey-esque narrative; the player takes control of a protagonist they name (who from this point I will refer to as Nier) who resides within a prototypical medieval village setting as he is forced to answer his own call to action. This sees him travel the entirety of the game's world in search of a cure for his terminally ill sister. Nier's characterization for much of the game reflects this unassuming setup; written as a proactive, responsible, and well-meaning individual, Nier is framed as the platonic ideal of the monomythic hero. Taro approaches this setup deliberately, and as the game's narrative develops, these conventions are slowly broken down. Nier (and by extension the player) takes on burdens for others impulsively, often placing himself amid people he does not know and circumstances he does not understand until eventually, *NieR* is reframed, not as a hero's journey, but as an examination of the morally unreconcilable which, through its interactive medium forces the player into ugly and unclear situations, evoking an inescapable of reflection and introspection on the content of the game's narrative.

Throughout *NieR Replicant*'s opening hours, a kind of banality takes hold of the game's objectives. Nier is sent on menial errands, he completes busywork and even following the disappearance of his sister Yonah. Even in the beginning of the game's first major combat-focused section, the morally correct course of action is presented in a universally unambiguous manner. Here, Nier and the player's reasonings are aligned. Nier helps his fellow villagers, and the player takes on these tasks because they ought to— embodying at once the linearity of the game, the assumed understanding of what must be done, and finally Nier's own compulsion to

offer his assistance wherever possible. As soon as these assumptions take hold though, *NieR* begins to plant the seeds of a world and of stories with far deeper moral complexity. Yonah's disappearance near the game's opening is not the result of a kidnapping, or, in fact, any foul play. Yonah's disappearance is indirectly linked to Nier's actions, a consequence of his responsibilities never granting him the space to be an active presence in her life despite his unquestionably good intent. Nier's escapades throughout much of the opening of the game are met with unambiguous success. While he rescues Yonah with no ill consequences, the game's plot begins to transform as Nier is prompted to leave his village in the service of his objectives—ultimately coming to a head at the game's third major area: Junk Heap.

Junk Heap, while being treated as a settlement within the game's world, is discovered to be little more than a lone house on the outskirts of an abandoned factory. This house is occupied by two children, one seemingly around the same age as Nier with a similar younger sibling for whom they assume responsibility. The two children confide in Nier about the desperation of their situation; they live without food and supplies, and their mother has been gone an uncomfortably long time. Assuming the responsibility of rescuing the children's mother, Nier begins a search. Nier's findings, however, mark a turning point in the tone of the game, as well as mark the first moment wherein the player is given the space to make their own decisions. Nier finds the children's mother, dead for an unclear amount of time but not alone. As the circumstance is examined, it becomes clear that the children's mother never had any intentions of returning; having lived in hopeless squalor, and trapped in her situation, her objective had been to escape, to abandon her children in hopes of carving out a better life for herself. What Nier does with this information falls to the player, who is given the option to lie about their findings, or to come clean with the circumstances of her disappearance.

Gregory Mellema, in his 2005 article “Moral Dilemmas and Offence” writes on what he calls “blame dilemmas”— that the ambiguity of moral dilemmas lies in an inability to remain blameless for one’s actions regardless of their decisions (292). Similarly, while Nier’s actions up to this point have been at least indirectly responsible for the harm being caused, they have also largely been outside of the player’s control, leaving the player comfortably blameless. Junk Heap’s circumstances, and those of the children, are different though; the player is never communicated an indication of rightness versus wrongness in their decision here as the children have no way of verifying the player’s potential lie. And, either way, the children’s mother will not return. Whichever course the player opts to take, the resolution is similarly ambiguous—even upon the revelation of their mother’s death and intent, the older sibling does not allow himself to be angry; he voices an understanding for the struggles she had gone through and comes to consider how he must care for his now orphaned little brother.

NieR’s exploration here, of the ability for well-meaning to do harm even as one is unsure of the extent of it, of the weight of being implicated into a critical and ambiguous situation, defines not just the game, but stretches out into the world beyond the screen. Even though our circumstances come to vary wildly from both Nier and each other, our world is filled with that very same precariousness and ambiguity. To that end, *NieR Replicant* (2021) acts as a vehicle for reflection, for an attempt at understanding the self and the consequences of one’s actions in a world where so rarely are solutions apparent— where it is important, now more than ever that people be able to navigate an increasingly confusing and unclear world.

Works Cited

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NieR Replicant. Steam PC version, 1.22, Toylogic Inc, 2021.

Is Thanksgiving Even Based Anymore?

Grant Li

Is Thanksgiving even based anymore?

Does it elicit such praise from websites and forums?

Can it compare to the likes of based Christmas or Halloween? Or

has it lost its shiny gloss, its based-holiday sheen?

Is Thanksgiving even based anymore?

Is it based to recall what you're thankful for? Is

it based to recall, the big and the small,

Those things that make living worth living at all?

Am I based if the thought of family time has me thrilled? If

I walk with my cousins, am I cousin-pilled?

If I dine with my nephews, am I an uncle-cel?

If Thanksgiving was based, would I be based as well?

Thanksgiving used to be based, based on loving and laughing

Based on smiling and playing, and dancing and clapping

But now loving is cringe and a smile is a soy face

And it seems like the turkey is the only thing that's baste

‘BERTA CRUDE

Harrison Nicholson

Back when my days were new, I could see sun-crested mountains every morning.
The lee of the Rockies was my cradle, fresh fallen snow was just an unformed igloo, and every unclimbed branch became a tree-house kingdom for me to conquer.
I, with tender feet and blistered palms, climbed on all fours and transformed my backyard bushes into thickets and my overgrown lawn into the great prairies.
I drank from the wellspring of my garden hose and made raspberry and rhubarb pie from my stupid-store harvest, licking juice from my paws like a brown bear cub.
I’d dust the rocky paths my father hiked as a scout red with prairie-fire pollen and slice my shins on serrated shale, smearing my blood like an offering to the Gods of Kananaskis on the trail head signs.
I was tethered to the ice-capped mountains and beetle-blighted valleys like a bright red arrow on a map labelled
You are here.

When the cold western rain crested over the mountains and soaked my skin, I’d shake the drops from my hair like wolves shake sleet from their fur.
I screeched like a snared fox when my father carried me away from the dying embers of a campfire to my chilly bunk bed blanket burrow.
A pack of wild sun dogs chased away the long darkness each winter morning and howled with the Chinook winds every summer night.
When those aurora coyotes yipped in their great den yonder I, a crepuscular creature, would yip too, just to be loud, just to be heard, just to feel the feral embrace of the Albertan night.

But now I’m ‘Berta crude, bumping down a newly paved highway stacked on an old-newly paved road packed on a pile of dirt that was once a den.
I swear up at the Bumblefuck honkey-tonks in their souped-up black and silver pickups like I’m the last bow valley pirate, not the kid of two oil-rich serfs to the diesel king.
I grind like a Pumpjack all day, circling around prey I can never catch, stuck in a perpetual rat-free Albertan rat race, beating back the oil-slick black dog that nips at my heels.

Now that stampeding pack of sky-spun coyotes devour the forests and the prairie-fire posies that once held me, calcifying the lungs I once used to yip with smiting smoke.
An empty show home stands on the middle of a mound of mud, like a solitary bastion of ‘progress’, where a forest that bears, birds, and badgers once called home.
In the dead stale summer, the Chinook arches, barely visible under the blanket of smog, give me pressure headaches and carry in tides of heat – hot enough to fry an egg, hot enough to have you panting like a dog, hot enough to make you sweat like a sinner in the Kanaskis Gods’ church.
Ash swaddles my sundered home, falling summer-snow that blankets my car, coats my raspberry bushes, and smothers my rhubarb.
I can’t salt the earth like I salt sidewalks.
I am here.

Moonful*

Adrienne Adams

but the moon is only full

for a fraction of a second

guess I *Flutter*TM my

eyelids between video games

squash *Starlight*TM to pieces

Smash smash

each fear a guess at infinity

Crippled

Tripled anxieties' axon tripped

it's tipped over and brimming

this humming is singing inside

i'm singe-ing verbs untie/unite the story plot

is empty of dirt this spring

i still have to do the planting

If university courses are a diversion from grief and not a real course of action then what is meaning, meaning a well intentioned grief counsellor can be full of bullshit if they don't care to hold people's hands when they need it most

wash yourself of the care of other people's sorrow.

Stories for stand in mythologies

dream electric sheep to being and anthropological game

i conquer course after course in cyber space and grow less lonely

reach out a hand that i not gasping, grasping

the sun once again is holding

If people don't in fact do their deepest work when in distress

Then tell me

When exactly do they?

i *Flutter*TM *Starlight*TM through the hum of thoughts

Lift colours off my lids

Lifting heavy laughter

ever

After.

Girls

Rachel Top

If happiness falls fat beams of sunshine
some girls have learned to soak in afternoon
glow. Beach day, noses crisped red. Sunshine
finds them easily, no barren caverns for shadows
to gather. Their skin has been taught to collect
freckles, familiar. Tan lines mark moments
of days forgotten and memorable, stories of laughter
on their shoulders, hips. Bright skies lie on their chests
and stomachs. Jack could find them if he really searched
but Frost will never clutch their long eyelashes. Blue will never
paint their lips, cheeks. If happiness falls in sun-kissed warmth,
some girls have taught the light to sing to them. They have won
the heart of an unknowing lover.

My unshaven thighs will tell stories of early mornings
clutching cool ceramic china. One more hour of dizzy decay
and the sun will touch my waist as it touches hers. Wait for
the magic I was supposed to have, begging for worship from
the sun. But the worship is clutched by slender fingers yet to
feel calluses, drowned by bliss-light laughter that catches the
sun

I'm Glad You're Still with Me

Jason Rude

“You’re up late.”

Seva started as Lenair’s voice broke the silence of the night, and she pushed herself back from the rampart to turn a faintly reproachful gaze upon her friend. “Clearly.”

Lenair smirked and propped his arms up against the rampart, the fur lining his leather armor shifting in the intermittent gusts of wind. The smirk died away as his gaze found the red glow that always occupied the horizon these days and he let out a long sigh.

“Looks like it’s gotten closer, doesn’t it?” Seva said quietly, tightening her grip reflexively on her spear.

“It always looks like it’s gotten closer,” Lenair’s long black hair obscured his face as he spoke. “That’s why we’re here.”

“I know that. I know why we’re here, Lenair. But it doesn’t really change anything, does it?” frustrated tears welled up in Seva’s eyes and she scrubbed them away furiously. “It’s only a matter of time.”

She turned around, tearing her gaze from the inferno that was slowly burning its way across her world and fixing her eyes instead on the distant lights of home; Celya, the city where nature and civilization lived in harmony. The city where the last of her people hid away from the southlands, behind a crumbling wall too weak to truly hold the enemy back.

“If they should come, we will be ready,” Lenair’s hand rested on her shoulder as the resonant tenor of his voice tried to calm her.

“We’ll never be ready,” came Seva’s bitter reply. “Nobody out there takes it seriously anymore.”

“But we do.”

“And what difference does that make?” Seva fought again to hold back tears. “We sit here alone on a wall, terrified of the world beyond, and back in Celya there is music and feasting and joy. They should be just as afraid as us, Lenair, and you know it.”

Her friend was quiet for a moment as the only sounds disturbing the silence were the distant sound of owls calling to each other, the wind rustling through the evergreen boughs around them. Seva exhaled heavily, shaking her head and stamping her spear into the stone beneath her a few times. “Sorry.”

“No, you’re right,” he said softly. “They should be afraid.”

Lenair turned to look at her, holding her in his steady gaze. “But what kind of life would that be? To live in fear every second of every day, to never know laughter or song?”

“It would be ours,” muttered Seva.

“And that is the choice we made. We took the oath to walk this wall, to defend our people. They laugh and love *because* we are here, Seva. We few will know fear and hardship so that the ones we love can have a life of peace and plenty,” the calm way in which Lenair spoke began to cut through Seva’s despair. “Would you truly wish this life upon them?”

Seva shook her head silently, looking again out to Celya. Framed in the mountain valley the distant city seemed serene and tranquil, though Seva knew that not to be the case. A slight smile tugged at the corner of her lips as she remembered the way she and her brother would run through the streets, laughing as they went, the bakers shouting and chasing behind them but never so quickly as to catch up. They would hide away in the boughs of the Eitren Tree, the mighty black trunk and golden leaves their keep, their bastion in which they could be safe, and feast away on their spoils of fresh-made bread and cherry tarts. They would stay through the

night, too stuffed to move, and in the morning return home with cheeks stained red by jelly to the stern gazes of their parents, but always with a hint of mirth hiding behind the disapproving stare.

“What changed us?” Seva murmured to Lenair. “We used to be so carefree, but now...now things are different.”

Lenair raised an eyebrow at her. “We grew up.”

“And why does that have to change things?” looking at her brother, Seva swore for an instant she saw the childlike grin he used to wear so often. Then the moment was gone, and the serious and bearded face she knew so well was before her again. “Why can’t we laugh anymore? Why can we not have joy?”

Silence stretched between the two. Another pair of sentries walked by behind them, giving the siblings nods as they passed before continuing their silent watch. Seva leaned her spear against the wall and rubbed her hands together to pull some heat back into them from the cold air. Lenair shook his head to scatter the snow that had gathered upon his hair and finally spoke.

“I’m just happy you’re still with me,” he turned a faint smile toward his sister. “Aren't you happy I don’t get you into as much trouble these days?”

“It was certainly more exciting than walking the wall,” Seva leaned her head against his shoulder and sighed.

“I’m glad you’re still with me too.”

CONTRIBUTORS

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Jason Rude is a second-year psychology student.

Rachel Top is a second-year English major whose submitted poem is an entirely original work written outside of class.

Colophon

This journal was set in Times New Roman.