1

Videogames and Alternative Imagination

Videogames invite us to explore and experience a wide range of more or less complex, more or less extensive and aesthetically compelling worlds. Some readers may be familiar with the colorful abstractions and sceneries in the Mario or Sonic franchises, the fantastic opponents and gloomy dungeons of *Dragon Quest*, *Pokémon* or *Dark Souls*, or the vast fictional worlds we can visit in *Chrono Trigger*, *Lost Planet* or *Final Fantasy*. To various degrees, these games offer distinct places and situations unlike many others their players may encounter in daily life. They fascinate and immerse, entertain and educate, or frighten us. In this book, I ask whether videogames can offer experiences that disrupt our perception of the status quo we live in and prompt us to fundamentally rethink the foundations of contemporary life in common. In other words, I explore the potential videogames have as radically political spaces—spaces of political philosophy—that engage with fundamental questions of how we may best live together and, by doing so, may reveal to their players new avenues for our imagination of a radically different, better world.

Why do we need alternatives in the first place? What is wrong with the current version(s) of neoliberal capitalism that dominates most societies and communities around the world? One part of the answer to this question can be found in empirical problems and contradictions in such societies, like the growing precariat and gap between poor and rich, or the devastating and irreversible effects established practices and routines in work and life have on human beings and, more fundamentally, nature. Some of the issues related to the status quo were not as openly visible to me when I started working on this book, like the rise of protectionism and nationalism in Europe or the US, which can be interpreted (not exclusively) as a reaction to the process of globalization and individualization.[1] For Japan, Yoshihara Naoki observes a similar reaction.[2]

The motivation for this study, however, is not primarily grounded in the above-mentioned findings. It is not so much the threat the status quo poses

to the empirical world that drives my interest in the political potentials of videogames, but the threat it poses to the imagination. Can we imagine any radical alternatives to the present at all today? Can you? I am having trouble with this task, to say the least. This may be a lack of creativity and knowledge on my part, but the problem seems more deeply rooted than that. Critical theorists and political philosophers have raised warnings about the decline of alternative imaginaries in recent years. Frederic Jameson has convincingly shown that in the case of science fictional literature, even the most radical attempts at imagining otherness are nothing but mirrors of our own situation. In his view, the future is not an imaginary space for alternative scenarios any more, but has lost its potential for change: the unknown future becomes "a new area for investment and for colonization by capitalism."[3] Karatani Kōjin goes one step further. In his two-volume *Structure of World History*, he shows how capital, nation and state have grown into a Borromean ring, in which each part follows its own logic but at the same time reinforces the others.[4] Karatani claims that this ring is overwhelming, in the sense that we not only lack viable alternatives, but have lost the capacity to imagine anything outside the current system.[5]

According to Jameson and Karatani, the problem is not just whether we find the "best" model for common life, but whether we are able to find any new alternatives to the status quo at all. This claim about our fading capacity to imagine the outside of our present situation may not apply for everybody everywhere. For those like myself, who struggle with it, it implies severe consequences. For, as David Runciman puts it, "[p]olitics is about the collective choices that bind groups of people to live in a particular way. It is also about the collective binds that give people a real choice in how they live. Without real choice there is no politics."[6] Those who are indeed unable to come up with viable alternatives to the status quo lack such choices beyond reformatory adjustments and momentary reactions, unless they revert to options that were left behind in the past. This is particularly problematic in today's challenging times, and the above-mentioned recent developments, although arguably more complex than I can portray here, suggest that many are indeed turning to the past for solutions.

To be sure, alternative imagination does exist. There are various examples of imagining, as well as attempts to practice alternatives.[7] Yet, given the warnings issued by the philosophers mentioned, any further space that welcomes and stimulates alternative imaginaries has a vital role in sustaining the ongoing political discourse about how we should live together, and enhances the

plurality and diversity of the choices available to us. In this book, I hope to contribute to this search by looking at videogame spaces.

Stimulating our imagination towards alternatives is not as simple as it may sound. It is not only a question of going to places we have not been to or doing things we have not yet done. There are many examples of games doing just that: flying a dragon through the world of *Dragon Quest* (*Dragon Warrior*), conquering hostile territory as in *Super Mario Bros.*, or defending the earth from alien invaders in *Space Invaders* are all things we could not have done if it were not for these games. As such, these games potentially stimulate our imagination in the general sense of the faculty that "enables us to envision that reality can be otherwise."[8] However, in this book, the imagination I am interested in is more specific than that. It is a kind of imagination that can guide political action towards realizing the alternative imagined. As Raymond Geuss puts it, "[a]ny organized attempt at improvement of our situation will include some at least minimal exercise of the imagination, in that it will require agents to think of ways in which their environment or modes of acting could be different from what they are now."[9] Noël Carroll establishes a similar link, arguing that

> through the exercise of the imagination we can envision alternatives to what is, especially better alternatives to what is from a moral or a political point of view. Understood this way, the imagination is what makes change—changes in moral and political circumstances—possible. The imagination is what enables us to conceive of a better world and, therefore, is a pre-condition for changing it morally and politically.[10]

Without an alternative vision of the world, we are unable to act toward change and improvement. The problem I pose in this book is whether videogames may offer spaces in which such visions are stimulated and can be experimented with. I will look at a series of videogames from Japan in order to verify my theoretical discussion.

Media Specificity

Videogames and "Japan" are not the only possible place to probe for a political contribution in the above-mentioned sense. At the same time, my choice is not a random one. Videogames combine, develop and redefine three significant, intersecting cultural elements presently at work: play, media and computation. In doing so, they offer distinct expressive and experiential spaces. I am not

inclined to assign any kind of "uniqueness" to videogames—indeed, I am not convinced that such an argument could ultimately withstand logical and theoretical scrutiny. Any idea can be expressed and experienced in a broad variety of media. However, I do believe that any medium or media environment offers distinct spaces of expression and experience, thereby triggering our imagination in a specific way and offering us a certain kind of experience with more likelihood than other media do. For example, the experience and imagination triggered by reading a novel may be very different than that of seeing the movie based on the novel. Like other media, videogames are a host to, but also a vehicle for the imagination.[11]

As media theorist Matsumoto Kentarō puts it, "Games cannot be reduced to entertainment any more. Studying them means to think about the 'contemporary relation between human beings and media', 'the relation between semiotics theory and media theory', or even 'the relation between strangers in cyberspace', or the communality that emerges there. In this sense, games are […] a territory in which heterogeneous elements touch each other and interweave."[12] It is this combinatory character that fascinated and challenged me to explore videogames as a political medium. In Chapter 2, I will take a closer look at its mechanics and dynamics.

In a broader historical perspective, this combinatory character is significant because it seems to respond to a critique of the modern paradigm of art raised in many developed societies during the second half of the twentieth century, and offer a novel avenue for political imagination under contingent, "postmodern" conditions. The crisis of imagination appears to be closely related to a crisis of artistic expression in recent decades. As aesthetic philosopher and cultural theorist Muroi Hisashi notes in the late 1980s, this crisis is closely related to a paradigm shift from the modern, totalizing attitude to the world, to a postmodern attitude of soft, blurry, or, as he calls it, "irresponsible fiction" or "irresponsible sensuality" (*musekinin na kyokō, musekinin na kansei*).[13] At the same time, it is also a result of a new, networked media landscape, which flattens contents and objects (media), changes the relation between work and copy and questions the relevance of an individual author, who was central to the highly personalized approach of modern art.[14] In other words, neither the individual (all-encompassing, totalizing) opinion of the artist, nor the singular, original work with its "unique" materiality, stand out any more under "postmodern" conditions. Other intellectuals like Azuma Hiroki have made more recent arguments about the shift in popular culture, from a relation between original

and copy, to a relation between non–hierarchical "derivates" without original to begin with.[15]

I am not ready to believe in the radical obliteration of materiality that Muroi suggests. However, his point regarding the changed conditions under which art—and thus one potential area in which imagination operates and is set into motion—remains important, not least, because Muroi himself criticizes the response to the changed conditions by "postmodern art," which he regards as "an attempt to maintain artistic autonomy without upholding its underlying ideals."[16] Against such decontextualized and thus depoliticized art, he demands that we rethink art in general by moving outside of its rigid, high-cultural territory. Post-art, he argues, is a kind of practice that shares with the traditional notion of avant-garde the aim of constantly challenging its limits and borders, while at the same time, moving outside of the "artistic" and aiming to create "expressions, that are open and welcoming to the outside" (*soto ni hirakareta hyōgen o tsukuridasu*). Most importantly, this practice needs to be embedded into the media network and its politics, disturbing it constantly from within, as a practice of "intervention" (*"kanshō" no jissen*).[17]

This reasoning may not appear novel today; indeed, the idea of "disruption" is already mostly embedded into popular discourse and therefore no longer threatening to the established power and the status quo. In fact, Owen counts "disruption" among the contemporary buzzwords, and as central to the doctrine of a new technology elite.[18] In this sense, it is far from self-evident which of the possible paths for art, after the end of the modern paradigm, videogames tread on: the depoliticized "postmodern," or the more vaguely conceived, blurry "practice of intervention". Graeme Kirkpatrick, for example, doubts that games have maintained any political force in the modernist sense of critique against the social situation or the world. While acknowledging that games might both be a sign of the present situation and a tool to think through it,[19] he ultimately concludes that the former dominates the experience. Playing games today, Kirkpatrick claims, in most cases does not involve a critical distance, and instead is becoming increasingly "consonant with the experience of work in the networked society."[20] While acknowledging the "disruptive and corrosive potential of play," Kirkpatrick ultimately insists on the dominance of aesthetic experience and performance over "content" in games: "playing a game involves a kind of distantiation from its narrative components, or conventional interpretations of its symbolic contents. This distance is often open to ironic inflection, although it is rarely (if ever) critical." [21]

In this sense, videogames may not be the most likely sources of intervention. Moreover, they are complicit in more general developments in capitalist economies. As Greig de Peuter and Nick Dyer-Witheford show, videogame companies are anything but innocent of the exploitation of creative labor forces.[22] Interestingly, the two authors view videogames as "*a paradigmatic media of Empire—*planetary, militarized hypercapitalism—*and* of some of the forces presently challenging it."[23] Once again, we find the two possibilities Muroi identified reflected. After all, De Peuter and Dyer-Witheford emphasize the ambivalence involved in contemporary media and videogame culture. Growing out of the military-industrial complex, they were simultaneously developed, in part, by hackers. An exemplary case of industrial exploitation and effective marketing strategies, they also spawned a subversive culture.[24] This is mostly true for Japan as well, although I should point out that although the videogame industry has some roots in the import of slot machines for the US military forces stationed in Japan,[25] it has not had such strong and direct ties in its later development.[26] Their political significance might be found more readily, at least in the case of Japan, by looking at their function in soft power strategies like the "Cool Japan" campaign by the Japanese government,[27] their strong influence on copyright and child protection legislation, their use for military training and recruitment, or their educational contribution as "Serious Games" or "Persuasive Games".[28] In any case, the skepticism about the political potentials of videogames in the context of their commercial and entertaining contexts should not be taken lightly.[29]

In contrast to this skeptical position, I aim to show that popular videogames are not only a "tool to think through" the status quo, but that they can open up spaces for thinking beyond it, although this does not mean that all videogames provide equal opportunities in this respect. If anything, the following analysis of the political possibilities of the medium is meant as a first step toward developing a critical perspective on the specific contribution individual videogame titles do or do not make to alternative imagination.

Nonetheless, I believe that the conditions Muroi identifies for a political artistic practice under postmodern conditions offer guidance in the search for possible spaces of radical political imagination today.

More than that, they suggest that videogames might be an intriguing starting point for this search, because most popular videogames indeed operate predominantly outside of the realm and logic of art. Moreover, videogames offer combinatory spaces in which their own limitations, as well as more general

cultural boundaries, can be challenged constantly on many levels. And they are challenged: At the intersection of technology and content, videogames have evoked a kind of exploratory or "frontier" spirit in their designers, programmers and engineers. Tane Kiyoshi, for example, stresses the effort many creative minds have put into exploring, challenging and repeatedly surpassing the limitations of videogame technologies throughout the history of the medium in Japan.[30] Famous videogame creator Endō Masanobu offers a fascinating account of how he and others challenged technological limitations in Japan during the 1980s.[31]

In the context of authorship and singularity, videogames, in a similar manner to film, have not only developed from machines designed from scratch by a few individuals or even a single person—as was the case with *Space Invaders* and its "father" Tomohiro Nishikado—to extensive products that sometimes involve more than a thousand people in the process.[32] Jan-Noël Thon observes that

> while there may be cases where one person is identified as the single author of a given film, comic, or video game (even though he or she will still commonly not actually be the only person who has contributed to the work in some way), the situation is usually not as clear-cut, and some version of collective authorship—which, more often than not, is situated within and determined by complex and powerful institutionalized frameworks of cultural production—appears to be the default case.[33]

He suggests speaking of a "hypothetical author collective".[34] Although the complexities of videogame creation and production are not the focus in this book, I would like to follow Thon's suggestion to address it, at least in my terminology. For this purpose, I will hereafter address the hypothetical group of people involved in developing, designing, creating, programing, testing and in other ways contributing content to a specific videogame, even if remotely, as "designers"—in part to maintain the language of the medium, and in part to express their "architectural" role in the construction of videogame space, to which I will return below. Moreover, videogames also experiment with the relation between creator (author) and player (reader) and shift their responsibilities for the instantiated work significantly. Furthermore, their spaces are not only built on technology, they are also, partly, instantiated and performed by the computer, as I will argue in more detail in Chapter 2.

In sum, these characteristics do not provide arguments for the "uniqueness" of

videogames, but they do suggest that videogames might be an intriguing—not to mention challenging—place to look for stimuli to our political imagination. While other recent inquiries into such stimuli have focused more specifically on the rich expressive potentials of avant-garde videogames,[35] I intend to look at popular videogames in more detail, in search for the practice of intervention that Muroi demands. This is not meant to deny artistic or explicitly avant-garde videogames their crucial political and formal thrust. Good examples of this force can be found in artistic games like La Molleindustria's *Everyday the Same Dream* or Newsgaming.com's *September 12th*.[36] That being said, I believe that popular videogames have a similarly rich and simultaneously more "interventionist" potential due to their position within a field dominated by commercial interests and entertainment. At the same time, those games that predominantly tread the path that Muroi has identified as overtly complicit or even complacent, demand critique. Instead of confronting them with more deliberately political works of art framed in an explicitly political context, and often in opposition to the commercial market, I intend to confront them on their own terms.

Japan

If videogames are a distinct but not unique source of imagination, the same can be said of Japan. In the context of my aims, the focus on videogames created (mostly) in Japan is not a necessary, but certainly a deliberate choice. This choice has to do with my research interests and specialization, but it also is a choice for engaging with a particularly vivid and experimental area of videogame production, both with regards to the context of this production and to its technical and industrial conditions. A closer look reveals that even the idea of delimiting the "Japanese" portion of videogames is problematic. Whether we tie the idea of "Japan" to nationality, geography or aesthetics, there are always examples that do not fit the respective categories.[37] Nonetheless, I am convinced that a close look at videogames in their specific regional, socio-cultural and historical context is crucial in the search for alternatives. Understanding not only the mechanisms by which games stimulate our political imagination—and where they fail to do so—but also their specific contexts, offers stimulating insights into the potentials such contextualized videogame expressivity has in local and global contexts.[38]

Regarding the historical and cultural context, Muroi's discussion betrays some of the trajectories in the discourse on "the postmodern," which is influential in Japan's popular culture and elsewhere to this day. Since the second half of the twentieth century, French poststructuralism and postmodernist dialogs

have had a visible and distinct influence not only on academic and intellectual discourses, but on everyday culture and society, in fields ranging from advertising and architecture[39] to subcultures and popular culture, related to anime, manga and games amongst others. The latter have developed a variety of distinct expressive—and economic—styles. The aforementioned Azuma, for example, stresses the importance of databases and characters in cultural production. According to his observation, the structuring function of grand narratives is replaced by a database of cultural elements, which is used to equip characters, thus producing "small" narratives.[40] Itō Gō and Nozawa Shunsuke refine and stress the importance of characters in contemporary Japanese pop-cultural production and consumption.[41] Otsuka Eiji has repeatedly highlighted the importance of the works' "world view" (*sekaikan*), which is used to generate a more or less coherent universe.[42] As Marc Steinberg and others have shown, these concepts serve as a basis for a widely embraced economic strategy, often referred to as "media mix".[43] Rather than offering a detailed account of these insightful thinkers and their work here, I will rely on them in my theoretical discussion and case studies below. For now, the more important point is that these theorists and critics mirror the vivid and widespread developments within Japan's popular culture of recent decades, of which videogames are an important part.[44]

All the more as the videogame industry and videogame culture in Japan has been growing during a period of economic downturn since 1989, when the country entered what is often referred to as "lost decade(s)".[45] During the years of the economic recession, the videogame industry remained relatively strong, not least thanks to innovations in the hardware sector. In this sense, videogames proliferated in a lasting period of aesthetic, cultural and economic uncertainty. In itself, this is not necessarily the case for Japan alone, but it arguably influenced in distinct ways some of the ideas and worlds found in games created in Japan. One example of this is the many games focusing on nuclear weapons and war, like the *Metal Gear Solid* or *Gundam* series discussed in more detail below. Dating simulations like *Tokimeki Memorial* or *Love Plus* offer specific experiences of social, romantic and erotic relationships, and, in many cases, reflect on the society of their times. The historically, culturally and socially contextualized personal engagements of designers, creators and programmers with the world must be regarded as distinct products of the specific situation these people find themselves in. The games I focused on in my case studies certainly are, both regarding the historical and socio-cultural context in general, and, as Tane's account of the history of videogames in Japan

suggests, also regarding videogame industry and culture in particular. Although I put little effort into elaborating these contexts in this book, I am interested in the vividness, inventiveness, expressive richness and sometimes ignorance with which videogame designers in Japan—and elsewhere—have responded to the historical developments of recent decades. Their games may speak to local issues as much as to locally perceived problems of global scale.

Play and Utopia

On yet another plane, videogames are a promising medium of political imagination, because they inherit, adapt and reinvent the notion of play, which, in turn, overlaps significantly with the concepts of utopia and science fiction. Examining the radical political imagination found in science fiction and utopia, Jameson claims that utopia is an "imaginary enclave within real social space." The utopian enclave exists "like a foreign body within the social," beyond its reach and therefore testifying to its political powerlessness, but nonetheless offering spaces where "new wish images of the social can be elaborated and experimented on."[46] For readers who are familiar with early conceptualizations of play, it may not come as a surprise that the courts of justice serve as a historical example of such an enclave for Jameson, and as one of the spaces of play for Johann Huizinga, "in form and function play-grounds, […] isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain."[47] Huizinga famously regards play spaces as "temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart."[48] He further claims that play is a sphere in which "the antithetical and agonist basis of civilization is given from the start,"[49] and suggests, in the words of Thomas S. Henricks, "that play was once an energizing, even culture-creating activity in the life of societies."[50] This conclusion invited substantial criticism for being limited to agonistic games[51] and his rough historical analysis and methodology in general.[52] However, even if we do not follow Huizinga in his entirety, the widely-shared definition of play as a space apart from the ordinary is strikingly similar to Jameson's enclave.

Moreover, they potentially share the enclave-like isolation from reality that Jameson regards as a necessary condition for developing utopian and science fictional alternatives to the present from within.[53] Similarly, Phillip Wegner identifies utopia as a closure of everyday experience and ideology on the one hand, and abstract theorizing on the other.[54] Applying Henri Lefebvre's tripartite model of space,[55] Wegner claims that narrative utopia derive their critical force from their character as conceived or "pretheoretical" spaces. They

occupy "a middle ground between the phenomenological concreteness of the literary aesthetic and the abstract systematicity of the theoretical," that is between the representational practices of literature that expresses lived experience, and those practices of theory that attempt to perceive these experiences in an abstract, systematic fashion.[56] What is more, due to position between these poles, "the displaced or neutral world of the utopia [becomes] a place wherein these [social and cultural; mer] contradictions do not come to a resolution but instead are allowed to play against one another."[57]

> [W]hile crucial aspects of a newly emergent social reality are present in the utopian figure, the relationship between these elements, dispersed as they are throughout the text, cannot yet be articulated. That is, the utopia presents a narrative *picture* of history-in-formation rather than the theoretical *description* of a fully formed historical situation.[58]

In other words, Wegner claims that ensembles or patchworks of existing elements can open spaces that are neither found in our empirical reality, nor accessible to theoretical summary, and which have the potential to point our thinking to new directions. Importantly, he emphasizes the potential for contradiction that these patchworks share. Hence, Wegner can write that "[b]y inserting something heretofore unknown in the world […] the narrative utopia generates the cognitive space around which new kinds of lived experience and theoretical perceptions form."[59]

Against this background, play spaces appear as a promising place to look for alternative imagination, or at least as spaces in which new ideas may be elaborated. Moreover, it is tempting to understand videogames as a particular instance of utopian projects, as Alexander R. Galloway remarks:

> An argument can be made that all videogames are, at a certain level, utopian projects, simply because all videogames create worlds in which certain laws are simulated and certain other laws are no longer simulated. The freedom to selectively simulate, then, operates in a videogame as the most important scaffolding for utopia.[60]

Enthusiasts embrace these rich potentials of enclosed play and videogames. For example, Jane McGonigal argues that videogames, from small-scale casual cellphone apps to epic massive multiplayer online worlds, can fix or at least enhance our broken reality by offering us more activating, fun, rewarding,

socially rich and fulfilling challenges than our boring quotidian lives.[61] McGonigal refers to, among other things, the gratifying structure of achievable goals and instant feedback, as well as the joy of collaboration amongst players—of being part of something "epic". Those of you who have played videogames may know the satisfying experience of beating an enemy boss after several hours of repeated failure, or the joy of a successful coordinated attack in online games. With her discussion, McGonigal takes up a thread woven by prominent play theorists like Friedrich Schiller, Johan Huizinga, Eugen Fink or Bernard Suits, who all identify an ideal version of "unproductive play" as a creative or opposing force in modern life and its constraints and teleological structures. The idea of making life measurable, offering feedback for small tasks, and requesting collaboration instead of competition is certainly appealing and could be put to use.

A powerful utopian vision, this idea, however, disregards the differences between life with its fatal causalities and its endless resources and repeatable, virtual videogame worlds that are played voluntarily and largely abstract the hardships of daily life in their algorithms. While the various types of online games (mmo, social games, etc.) certainly offer vivid spaces of political negotiation and individual identity work, a significant share of research into these worlds suggests that these spaces are often a perpetuation of the discrimination, inequalities and power struggles well-known from outside of game worlds.[62] On a wider scale, *gamification* emphasizes the activating and motivating potentials of playful and goal-directed scenarios and, at the same time, advocates the deployment of game-like structures in all areas of society in general, and as a new and promising path for business models and consumer products in particular.[63] As Galloway remarks, "today, it would be entirely naive to believe that play retains its anti-capitalist or anti-work status."[64] Moreover, he revises his above-cited statement about the utopian status of videogames, pointing out that, "the very act of creating an immaterial utopian space […] inscribes a whole vocabulary of algorithmic coding into the plane of imagination that thereby undoes the play of utopia in the first place."[65]

Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford, and Greig de Peuter, are more pessimistic about videogames and digital technologies in general. They claim that "to the degree that it [digitalization; mer] supplants rather than supplements other forms of sociality and experience, it also contains the seeds of diminishment, atrophy, or attenuation. […] Interactivity, for example, may not only be empowerment and education, but also loss and amputation, as digital aptitudes squeeze out or devalue other nonelectronic capabilities."[66]

More drastically, Paul Virilio predicts that the future will be populated by the "the self-sufficient man who, with the help of technology, no longer needs to reach out to others because others come to him. […] The future lies in cosmic solitude."[67] He criticizes virtual play and videogames for replacing the stimuli of the imagination with mechanical instruments and repetition. In his view, the videogame player is "hurried by the machine." In games, "travelers are traveled. Dreamers are dreamed. They are no longer free to move about, they are traveled by the program. They are no longer free to dream, they are dreamed by the program."[68]

Virilio denies that videogames afford such freedom, not only because they are predetermined and offer the player a limited number of choices, but because this restriction, in his view, limits the player's imagination. This is not to deny the attractiveness of virtual life, but, in an inversion of McGonigal, it is a warning about the threat the virtual poses to "non-virtual" life, including our imagination of alternatives. While escapism and addiction to videogames, and their attractiveness over reality, as McGonigal puts it, should not be taken lightly, this critique can hardly be generalized at the present stage. What is more, the dualism of real and virtual seems obsolete and misleading. A more detailed analysis is beyond the boundaries of this book. If anything, then, escapism reminds us of the difference between the potentials of the medium I aim to unveil, and an empirical analysis of the play experience of multiple players. It also serves as a motivation for a more full-fledged analysis of the experience of other players, which I leave as a task for future research.

More importantly, however, is Virilio's claim that videogames replace the player's imaginative freedom with machine control. This argument subtracts from videogames what Huizinga and others found fascinating in play, and ultimately rejects my project from the outset. After all, if videogames are only about predefined algorithmic worlds in which the player's freedom is reduced to reaction, one might think that there is little hope for stimulating alternative imagination. Arguably, the political demand for opening alternatives needs to be reflected in the internal structure of the medium—without meaningful choice on the player side, there is little hope for a political potency. Instead of giving up, however, I propose to take Galloway's and Virilio's critique seriously in two ways.

First, it would be naïve to demand utopian solutions to all contemporary problems from a visit to the rich and powerful worlds videogames offer. Reflecting the above-mentioned shift from grand narratives to disparate pieces

(the "postmodern"), my search does not aim to find "the" ideal alternative to the present, which, in turn, is not identified as "one system," but rather it is looking for interventions. I return to Galloway for dialectic guidance for this project. While arguing, similar to Kirkpatrick, that "video games are, at their structural core, in direct synchronization with the political realities of the informatic age," he claims that this is exactly why they can make transparent the otherwise hidden "boring minutiae of discipline and confinement that constitute the various apparatuses of control in contemporary societies."[69] Embracing the ambivalence inherent in videogames, Galloway succeeds in identifying some of their most intriguing political and utopian potentials in the most unlikely places. In a sense, his approach is similar to what Frederic Jameson calls the utopian method, e.g. a search for utopian moments that is not afraid to look for them in the most extreme dystopian environments.[70] It will serve as a perspective for my approximation of concrete videogame titles. Second, Galloway prompts us to take the technology of videogames seriously, if we are to understand the expressive and experiential potentials and limitations of videogame space.

Thus, I do not intend to draw a romantic image of gameplay activities. Nonetheless, I hope to show that the potential videogames have is in their power to stimulate reflection on and reconceptualization of some of the underlying mechanisms and foundations of contemporary life and, through this, point towards new ways of rethinking them.[71] This book remains vague about the position and influence of modern and postmodern elements in contemporary society, culture and politics—these elements are mixed, remixed and interdependent to an extent that, in my view, does not sanction any clear-cut perspectives.

Political Philosophies

The task of reflecting on the fundaments of life in common is one sometimes ascribed to philosophy and, more distinctly, to political philosophy. Beiner regards the latter as "the privileged intellectual space wherein human beings reflect, *in the most comprehensive way*, on what it is to be human."[72] In his understanding, political philosophy is "a dialogical enterprise conducted in relation to superlatively ambitious articulations of 'the human good'."[73] Judging from his selection of materials, Beiner's conception of political philosophy remains conservative insofar as he privileges great political thinkers. For him, the dialog of political philosophy remains "a dialogue between epic theorists and epic theories," who have the will "to articulate single grand thoughts."[74] The important contributions to thought and the conception of human life of

such epic figures and theories notwithstanding, I believe that the endeavor of conceptualizing the foundations of life in common is not reserved for great philosophers exclusively. Is it not the tasks of academics and intellectuals to uncover traces of such conceptions in ideas and practices found in various places?

One of the key questions I would therefore like to raise in this book is whether videogames can be a medium of political philosophy in this sense of rethinking the foundations of life in common. In order to avoid jumping to conclusions, it seems fair to consider the possibility that political philosophers are more intentional and "comprehensive" about their task than videogames might be—after all, they are at least in part commodities of entertainment. Therefore, I use the term "political imagination" instead of political philosophy as a marker for alternative imaginaries of any degree that challenge the status quo (and our individual, subjective "non-game reality"[75]) on a fundamental level. In this book, I ask how videogames might stimulate such visions of different, novel conditions, structures, practices and environments for life in common, which might serve as the basis for political action geared towards realizing them. In other words, I insert videogames into the political philosophical dialog.

This is not just a question of whether videogames speak to issues focused on in political philosophical discourses. Against the background of the above-mentioned distinct expressive and experiential qualities videogames feature, it is also a question of HOW videogames engage with this discourse. It should already be clear that the mode of conduct differs significantly from the idea of the epic theorist offering an epic theory. While I have no interest in diminishing such efforts, I nonetheless hope to show that political philosophy can benefit from seriously considering different ideational spaces and different ways of doing political philosophy—ways that maybe closer to the "practice of intervention" envisioned by Muroi. The analysis below suggests that selected videogames indeed bring something to the table of political philosophy. Making use of their distinct expressive and experiential capabilities, they both offer "tactical theories" capable of exposing existing boundaries,[76] and provide spaces for experimenting with breaking these boundaries. We will not find full-fledged theories of life there, but maybe stimuli for thinking beyond the ordinary are more than enough.

Infusing political philosophy with videogame spaces from Japan, in turn, means that I arrange the videogame spaces I am inquiring about on the same plane as the ideas and theories of the political philosophers that I quote below in

the analysis. Some readers may notice a bias in the selection of these ideas and theories, which have predominantly developed in the US, Germany, France, Italy and, to a lesser extent, in Japan or other, "non-Western" countries. On some level, I risk falling into the old dichotomy of "Western theory" and "Japanese raw data," which has been heavily criticized in the past from the perspective of area studies.[77] Certainly, this project would have benefited from more diverse perspectives on the political philosophical issues I discuss in the following chapters, but this was beyond my capacities.

That said, I am unequivocal on the point that I do not consider the videogames I present as "raw data". If the convoluted analytical apparatus I apply to the videogame spaces in the analysis suggest such framing, this is largely because they require a kind of approximation that decisively diverges from textual work—which, in turn, appearing more or less self-explanatory, even if it is anything but, is often not mentioned or explained as a specific approach to the materials discussed. However, I hope that the method of analysis employed does not distract or disguise the point I am trying to make: by analyzing them in the context of specific political philosophical problems, I intend to take the videogame spaces seriously as genuine contributions to the discussion of these problems, not as "mere reflections" of the issues in a different medium. Thus, the theories presented below are as much "raw data" for my subsequent engagement with some of the issues underlying contemporary life.

Productive Conflicts

But what should we really expect of videogame spaces? What do I mean by spaces that "stimulate the imagination"? I have mentioned that I am not hoping to find full-fledged utopias in videogames. In fact, Muroi's analysis helps clarify this point. For, if the crisis of art stems precisely from its totalizing, all-dominating approach to the world, any utopian totality must fall into the same trap. What other ways are there, then, to unsettle the foundations of the status quo and to stimulate us to think beyond it? How, to speak with Susan Buck-Morss, can the experience of videogames "teach us something new about our world, that it shock us out of moral complacency and political resignation, and that it take us to task for the overwhelming lack of social imagination that characterizes so much of cultural production in all its forms."[78]

I have already pointed out that targeting general notions of the imagination, in the way that Carroll suggests, may not be enough. In fact, Carroll himself grants that imagination stimulated by mass art tends to corroborate the status

quo rather than challenging its foundations. Examining the ways in which mass art features emotions, morality and ideology, he concludes his analysis by stating that, in the attempt to grant easy and wide access, "mass art addresses widely distributed emotions, invokes pervasive moral principles and concepts, and exploits ideological commonplaces because it is predicated on engaging mass audiences. Were mass art to address uncommon emotions, morals, and political convictions, it would not secure mass uptake."[79] While I do not want to rule out any possibilities without further scrutiny, the dominance of the familiar over the "uncommon"—to use Carroll's carefully picked term—suggests that mass art has limited capacities for shock, and, by extension, may not be the most immediate trigger for radical imagination.

One version of a more radical shock is the mechanism of cognitive estrangement widely discussed in the context of literary science fiction and narrative utopias. Jameson regards this as "a critical and analytical method" that answers "the universal ideological conviction that no alternative is possible, that there is no alternative to the system."[80] In other words, they disrupt our common perception and our resignation.[81] An early and influential explanation of the mechanisms that achieve this disruption is that respective works need to confront their readers with a plausible alternative, thereby producing what Darko Suvin calls "cognitive estrangement."[82] This alternative, according to Suvin, is constructed by deploying a so-called *novum*, something new and unfamiliar, as carefully and rigorously as possible to the entire fictional world.[83] While still very useful with regards to the mechanism of estrangement and its complexities, Suvin's concept, in a certain sense, leaves us at an impasse. For, while he stresses the importance of totality in the sense of a comprehensive application of the novum, others, like Jameson or Muroi, have observed the failure of totalizing engagements. According to Jameson, the utopian genre can only solve this problem by means of its formal ability to draw together diverse existing elements to generate new contradictions and to imagine the other by shifting the known.[84] In other words, Jameson suggests a shift from an engagement with the totality of a work, to the relation between the elements involved in a work. Japanese writer Abe Kōbō seems to second this approach, placing the aim of estrangement at the center and the "scientific manner" or "totality" of the engagement in the periphery.[85] Against the background of the combinatory character of videogames, this appears a helpful suggestion.[86]

A similar notion of contradictions sourced in a drawing together of disperse elements is also central in the writings of Theodor W. Adorno. Adorno remains one of the most provocative and critical thinkers of the potentials and dangers of

art and culture, despite his tendency toward elitisms and his arguably arrogant and sometimes apparently ignorant, generalizing dismissal of mass culture,[87] jazz music and especially "the other" of extra-European art.[88] Geuss observes that Adorno emphasized the importance of art with its potential for internal criticism and its ability to produce something new, against the tendency of the Enlightenment rationality toward universal instrumental reason and its repressive homogenization, which he rejected. For Adorno, he claims, art and culture are political if they resist being reduced to instrumental categories, and, in fact, in the way they resist categorization as such. Instead, Adorno labored to "defend what he calls 'the non-identical': the unique, the qualitatively specific, the unrepeatable, the 'other', that which cannot simply be seen as just one more indistinguishable specimen of a general category, interchangeable ad libitum with any other specimen. This 'other' is that which slips through the network of our concepts and theories."[89] It is here, I argue, that we can find traces of a more prospective project in Adorno's writing. Adorno believed that "[o]pen thinking points beyond itself" and that culture and art succeed when they promote such thinking.[90] Taking a critical, in some instances perhaps unjustified position toward popular culture, he challenged culture and art to contribute to a free society of "autonomous, independent individuals who judge and decide consciously for themselves."[91]

Adorno insisted on the importance of individual "*Phantasie*" as necessary condition for "new" thoughts or productivity as "the ability to bring forth something that was not already there."[92] Translated as "imagination" in his English translations, *Phantasie* is a faculty that "might of its own accord gather together the discrete elements of the real into its truth."[93] In other words, *Phantasie* refers to a way of accessing the inner logic of a work that includes a "sensuous moment" beyond measurability and physical evidence. As a counter-concept against Enlightenment rationality, *Phantasie* is not limited to "scientific rationality" and rejects purely schematized imagination, although not entirely detached from cognition. Importantly, he believed that culture and art can stimulate and trigger *Phantasie* by challenging us with internal conflicts. These conflicts, neither solved within the work, nor obvious, confront the individual with a new situation, demanding independent thought and autonomous judgments. In other words, Adorno did not demand of the author to present (utopian) alternatives or estranging worlds built on novelty. Rather, he locates the potential for productivity in the subject appropriating conflict-laden culture and art.

Claiming that such conflicts are only possible in "wholeness," which is another way of saying internally, he rejects distinction in general, be it between theory and practice, mass culture and high art, work and free time, or between society and art/culture, as a regressive means (of capitalist society in particular) to avoid internal contradictions and conflicts and to ultimately incorporate the now detached realms into its mechanisms of production for a consumer society.[94] Here, the trends towards universalization, categorization and homogenization are exposed as concrete mechanisms in modern capitalist societies. For Adorno, art and culture are, at least potentially, spaces of resistance against these trends, by way of conflicts that cannot be subsumed in existing categories.

Thanks to this detour, I am now able to further specify the vague notions of otherness and disruption, thus answering the questions posed above at least tentatively. Both Jameson and Adorno stress the importance of rearranging—or drawing together discrete elements—in a novel, disruptive way. Jameson regards the resulting otherness and its disruptive act against the status quo as such as the final goal of this patchwork. Adorno, on the other hand, identifies the target of political art as our imagination that is stimulated by the unsolved conflict the patchwork confronts us with. He is interested not only in the tensions within a work and the otherness (conflict) they give birth to, but in their significance as confrontational moments with an audience used to easily access "mass art" in Carroll's sense (see above). For the purpose of this book, I propose to adopt his standard. In other words, otherness is understood hereafter as unsettling internal conflicts that are potentially productive due to the challenges they pose to those experiencing them. Because they do not provide easy answers, such conflicts prompt the player to think for herself. As a result, they might be capable of challenging us to reflect on and rethink the foundations of our present life.

Crucially, this understanding of the medium's political potentials frames these conflicts as neither ubiquitous, nor abstract or timeless. Instead, these conflicts are, in part, a result of a specific game's position in and entanglement with historical, social, political and cultural contexts, both in the broader sense and with regards to game culture. Moreover, players experience them—or not—against the background of their own contexts. A conflict can only arise if the player recognizes it as such. Furthermore, I suspect that it is difficult to experience the same conflict twice in the same game. What is more, the player might—purposefully or not—ignore the conflict in favor of other pleasures derived from playing. This implies that my own gameplay experience, which serves as central empirical basis for the analysis, is one of many possible ways

of experiencing videogame spaces. The argument I make in this book is thus not that every player experiences the conflicts I identify in the analysis. Instead, these are conflicts that I have personally experienced at play, against the background of my interest in their possibility. As such, they serve as examples of the political potentials—the potentials for productive conflicts—that videogame technology offers. While a more detailed discussion of the conditions of such experiences of conflict remains a task for the future, I will return to the methodological implications of this framing in the next chapter.

Science Fiction and Other Selection Criteria

Given the sheer number of games released in Japan, the question remains, where to start. If my answer to the question "why Japan" did not satisfy you, the following engagement might not either. In the end, it is one deliberate but not necessary choice. By way of transparency, I would like to offer an account of how I determined the selection I subsequently discuss—I do so rather more urgently now, since it is a choice of games for analysis that might appear surprising to some readers. After all, given my references to the many intriguing experiments done in the neighboring fields of anime and manga, such as visual novels and dating simulations, most of the games I explore are more remote to these fields.

Several assumptions, requirements and limitations guided this question. My initial guiding assumption was that I might be able to identify examples of productive conflicts more easily in videogames that aim to reflect on or critique the present status quo, which led me to singling out the group of videogames explicitly engaging with science fictional themes and methods. This choice is related to my general interest in conflicts, which, in turn, is related to the quest for not just any alternative imaginaries, but such imaginaries that may help guide us toward a better life in common. Arguably, the conflicts games confront us with might be more effective, or at least easier to identify in this initial exploration, if they are not driven by magic and fantasy, but remain somehow connected to our empirical surroundings. Given Adorno's notion of *Phantasie*, this evaluation is open for discussion and further scrutiny.[95] In fact, if we were to extend the view to forms of social interaction between players, to take just one example, I suspect that science fictional tendencies might become less relevant as a marker for the political. However, instead of looking at the expressivity of networked and online worlds and the multiplayer experience, I decided to start with the more contained field of single-player game modes and their experience. In this context, the political potential of conflicts is less a result

of specific kinds of social interaction with other players, and more a question of the relation between the player's everyday reality and the alternative situation or world in which he or she plays. Disruptive conflicts and stimuli of alternatives have to be recognizable and recognized as such if they are to be engaged with.

The field of science fiction is relevant here because it makes the inquiry of total otherness and its relation to the status quo—its "recognizability" from our present position—its central motive. Science fiction has to be distant and detached enough from the present to confront us with otherness, but not so distant from the known that it turns into implausible fantasy or risks alienating the reader.[96] The genre has been widely discussed by political thinkers precisely because it remains plausible to some extent, detached from our experience but at the same time upholding a connection to our empirical reality.[97] The underlying assumption shared by many science fiction authors and theorists is that the genre derives its critical, disruptive momentum from its negotiation of plausibility with regards to the social realities its readers live in,[98] and its playful, poetic and speculative manner and "fundamental *hospitality to otherness.*"[99] Looking at the above-mentioned approaches to defining science fiction by Suvin and Abe, a widely shared standpoint is that the genre draws its force not so much from the scientific rigor of its content, but from the "novum" it introduces and from the careful scientific method by which the novum is applied, and by which, therefore, such otherness is welcomed, constructed and ultimately deciphered by the audience.[100]

Whether the distinction between science fiction and other genres is as clear-cut as Carl Freedman and others portray it or not, cannot be answered in this book. Nonetheless, science fiction is central to negotiating plausibility.[101] Plausibility, in turn, can be suspected to be an important factor in determining the political character of the imagination it stimulates and confronts us with, or at least the likelihood of it being recognized. As such, science fictional videogame spaces are a likely place for the kinds of conflicts I am interested and will serve as a starting point for my exploration. This may appear problematic, given that it is debatable whether science fiction amounts to a videogame "genre". In fact, Dominic Arsenault concludes from his analysis of the academic and popular use of the "genre" concept and existing taxonomies in the context of videogames that this use is imprecise, intuitive, far from rigorous in its classification and different across media and disciplines.[102] If anything, he identifies a dominance of gameplay as a structuring factor at the highest level, expressed in genres like "Action," "Adventure," "Strategy" or "Shooter."[103] Against this background, I will refer to science fiction as a theme and select those videogames that

predominantly engage with this theme, by following its logic of constructing and confronting us with plausible otherness.

Second, I assume that some of the most intriguing popular videogame spaces, with regards to experimenting with the boundaries of the medium and hosting disruptive conflicts, may appear during a time in which a rich set of expressive means is available for exploration by a maximum number of parties. In the case of Japan's industry, one such time is from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s. In the wake of the economic breakdown in 1989, new consoles like the Game Boy (1989), the Super Famicon (SNES, 1990), the Playstation (1994), the Nintendo 64 (1996), SEGA's Dreamcast (1998), and the Playstation 2 (2000) offered a greater breadth and depth of expression, while maintaining a comparably low entry barrier, thus inspiring designers to develop more diverse, experimental games.[104] According to Nobushige Hichibe, the development costs of new, original titles rose significantly since then. He observes that the videogame industry increasingly avoids the high risks of original and innovative ideas, instead favoring series, remakes and adaptations from other media. Due to the high initial costs, small- and medium-size companies are increasingly forced out of the market or turn into suppliers for the bigger players.[105] In this sense, an aesthetically rich but still "affordable" period of videogame development appeared interesting to look at. As you may know, a great many consoles were in the market during these years. However, the statistics of all releases in Japan since the 1980s, listed on the Japanese Media Art Database, indicate that the Sony PlayStation and subsequent products in the PlayStation series were particularly popular (see Figure 1).[106]

In addition to these admittedly vague limitations of scope, some important practical matters further determined the initial selection. Firstly, this research suggested playing the games as its central method. In an academic project, this implies documenting the playing experience as comprehensively as possible and, in my case, the method of choice in this regard was capturing the gameplay. This, in turn, was significantly more difficult with handheld consoles at the time when I conceived this research, making the choice for games available on the PlayStation, PlayStation 2 and PlayStation 3 the most manageable choice to start this work. Trading data collection and research documentation in for an enhanced scope was not an option in the first exploration. There is no theoretical or content-related justification for this limitation—if anything, it offered a similar gaming situation and controller layout. At the same time, some of the games I played were initially not
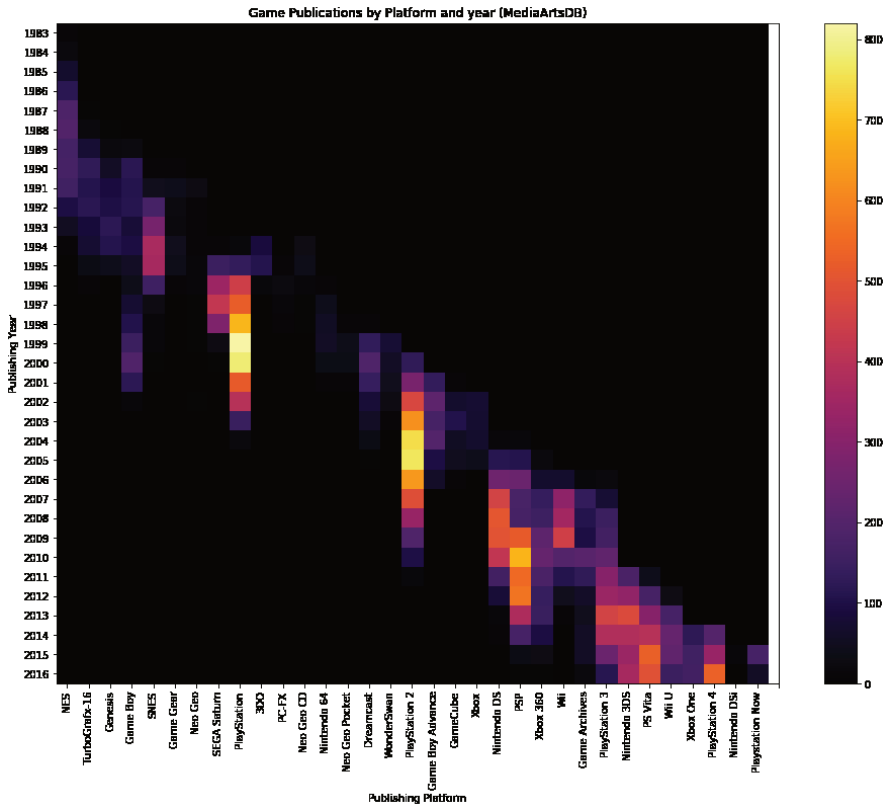
Figure 1. Number of releases per platform and year based on the Japanese Media Art Database, created by Florian Rämisch for the project diggr.

developed for these consoles, like *Chrono Trigger*, which first appeared on the Super Nintendo Entertainment System.

In sum, these conscious choices and technical limitations resulted in a relatively well-delineated starting point for this study, which focuses on videogames developed (mostly) in Japan during the 1990s and early 2000s, and that involve a science fictional theme and are published for Playstation home consoles. However, videogames are more diverse and richer than that, and I could have done more to widen the view. More specifically, the selection of games presented below shares literary science fiction's tendency of catering to male audiences and, to a lesser degree, reflect my own gameplay preferences. By focusing on ludic elements rather than the stories and worlds games present, and thus excluding some of the intriguing examples in the genre of visual novels, I

skip an important group of videogames in Japan. Other consoles and devices, and contexts, such as the amateur scenes in Japan, are no less interesting.[107] I can only hope that my work and its various biases stimulate and motivate others to dig deeper and explore other parts of gaming culture for their political potentials, with and beyond the context of Japan.

The Structure of This Book

The twofold question this book raises is whether videogames can offer means to create contradicting ideational spaces that direct our political imagination of life in common beyond the familiar, and what specific cases from Japan have to offer in this regard.

One of the main assumptions outlined above is that videogames offer radical potentials because they allow for distinct ways of combining diverse elements and mechanics, whether representational or not, in new, conflicting ways. As such, videogame spaces might also change the ways in which political philosophy is done. This, in turn, means taking them seriously as playful media technologies, as recent scholarship on videogames has rightly demanded.[108] In order to narrow down the potential videogames have to host conflicts, the following chapter will take a closer look at the building blocks of videogame spaces. In this book, videogames are regarded as the sum of all rules inscribed in the software. Based on this definition, I show how these rules demarcate an ideational space characterized by world multiplicity, contingency, partiality and semantic arbitrariness of representation, player enactment and a broad range of variously combined expressive means. Disruptive conflicts emerge from the ways in which designers, player and computer negotiate the myriad elements and expressive features this space may host. In the final section of the chapter, I touch upon the methodological problems my conceptualization of videogame space provokes, offering some suggestions for how to solve them. Primarily, I propose to study games through repeated play, and to enhance the researcher's experience with external data about the game, such as walkthroughs, player discussions and guidebooks.

The third chapter gives an overview of some general tendencies in Japan's videogame culture of recent years and offers an experimental analysis of some popular franchises in the genre of science fiction. This chapter draws attention to the requirements for conflicts and highlights cases in which conflicts fail to develop any radical potential, such as the *Gundam* franchise, *Front Mission*,

Ace Combat and *Armored Core*. As such, the chapter offers a rationale for my selection of cases and serves as a negative foil for the subsequent inquiries.

In Chapter four, I look at the ways in which *Chrono Trigger* and *Shadow of Memories* (*Shadow of Destiny*) play with time. Against the background of Virilio's dromology and his warning against the limitless acceleration of life, I examine how the negotiation between a complex narrative structure created by the designers and player choices confronts the player with a paradoxical temporal multiplicity that challenges our common, linear concept of time that serves as the basis for contemporary life in common. Chapter five deals with the political potential of aesthetic experiences in *Rez*, *The Earth Defence Forces* and *Neon Genesis Evangelion 2*. It asks whether videogames offer ways to alter what Jacques Rancière calls "the distribution of the sensible," i.e. the boundaries of what can be said and thought. Analyzing how the negotiation between the computer and the player can lead to counter-intuitive, uncanny conflicts, I show that these conflicts open our eyes to the non-human other in disruptive ways. In the last case study, I turn to game rules and action (Hannah Arendt, Giorgio Agamben). My exploration of the tension between rules specified by the designers, computer performance and player action created in the *Metal Gear Solid* series shows that the conflicts openly played out in these games offer the player spaces for experiencing (bureaucratic) control and exploring counter-measures. As I show, in rare instances these conflicts give way to an experience of free action.

The three detailed case studies presented in chapters four to six contain cross-references, but each of them investigates a different aspect of videogame space in the context of one or more concrete examples from Japan. Thus, these chapters can be read in any order. I have arranged them so as to gradually move from a more contained relation (in the context of an admittedly highly abstract concept, that of time) toward a more experimental, open constellation of elements and concepts, the contours of which are vague and, at several points, spill over the edge of this book. Taken together, the case studies offer a series of hints for critical engagements with videogames as spaces of political philosophy. Most videogames may not readily help us in our struggle for a better life in common. However, those examples that escape the framework of complicity and representation to offer deeply unsettling, disruptive moments, are worth examining more closely, as they indeed offer some direction for imagining radical alternatives. My hope is that this book may inspire game designers,

players and scholars to explore these potentials, as much as the limitations, further.

It tries to do so not only in writing. As mentioned above, the analysis in this book relies heavily on my own playing experience of the games. The written text you have before you cannot betray this experience sufficiently, and, more generally put, I am not convinced that any other medium or channel of mode of relating this experience can. Nonetheless, I have tried to convey some of the gameplay I experienced and approximate intersubjective understanding to some extent. The written text conveys only two thirds of the argument I present in this book. The consecutive chapters feature references to short gameplay clips, which I have recorded and edited during my research, and which hopefully make my analysis more transparent and accessible to those readers who have not played the games in question themselves. More importantly, these videos are an attempt at communicating some of the gameplay experience on which the analysis is largely based. Given that I am arguing for the distinct expressive potentials of games vis-à-vis a text or film, I do not imply that the recordings actually betray the richness of the experiences I made. For that, the games need to be played. However, as they at least offer one way of approximating this experience to some degree, I regard them as vital parts of my arguments. In the broader context of this book, they are also a first, very small step toward rethinking what it means to think and philosophize in a space that includes media other than text.

The videos can be found via:

http://asobiba.de/martin/thought-provoking-play/videos/

I would like to invite you to watch them and evaluate my findings yourself, even if you know the titles under scrutiny.

Notes

1. This tendency has been observed in recent-day Germany, where, according to a far-reaching empirical comparison between 2006 and 2016, both the democratic milieu and more radical forces are growing (Decker, Kiess and Brähler, *Die Enthemmte Mitte*).

2. Yoshihara [吉原], *Komyuniti Sutadiizu*, 144–46. A similarly hostile reaction to the

"globalization" of a specific idea of (Western) modernity can be found condensed in the symposium "Overcoming Modernity" held in Japan in 1942. This event brought together a number of leading Japanese intellectuals of the time who shared the urge to conceptualize alternatives to Western-style modernization. A number of these ideas ended up supporting the militarist Tenno state and the imperialism of Japan in Asia.

3. Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 111, 211, 228.

4. Karatani, *The Structure of World History. From Modes of Production to Modes of Exchange*; a condensed version of the book has been translated by the author: Karatani, *Auf der Suche nach der Weltrepublik*.

5. Karatani, *Auf der Suche nach der Weltrepublik*, 11.

6. Runciman, *Politics*, 10.

7. See for example Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules*, 100–101.

8. Carroll, *A Philosophy of Mass Art*, 79.

9. Geuss, *Politics and the Imagination*, ix–x.

10. Carroll, *A Philosophy of Mass Art*, 79.

11. Think, for example, of the term cyberspace coined by science fiction writer William Gibson, who recalls that new technologies like videogames were among the things that inspired this word creation. Cyberspace, in turn, has served as a far-reaching vision and inspiration for computer and software engineers in many places. Not least, it served as a vehicle for the intellectual and academic imagination. In Japan, I found both examples of "prognostic" engagements with the possibilities and various functions computer technology might have in the future in fields ranging from space and deep sea to medical treatment, crime prediction and traffic (Aijima [相島], *Konpyūta no Kagiri Naki Chōsen*), and critical engagements with a possible future based on computer technology (Muroi [室井] and Yoshioka [吉岡], *Jōhō to Seimei*). The latter is particularly intriguing, as the authors self-consciously frame their exploration as "science fictional" attempt of understanding and critically engaging with the present (Muroi [室井] and Yoshioka [吉岡], 49–50).

12. Matsumoto [松本], "'Gēmuka Suru Sekai' ga Motarashita Mono, Motarashitsutsu Aru Mono," 12, my translation.

13. Muroi [室井], *Posutoāto Ron*, 18.

14. Ibid., 47–49.

15. Azuma [東], *Dōbutsuka suru posutomodan*, 84–95; in English published as Azuma, *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*.

16. Muroi [室井], *Posutoāto Ron*, 51.

17. Ibid., 53–57.

18. Owen, *Disruptive Power: The Crisis of the State in the Digital Age*, 6.

19. Kirkpatrick, *Computer Games and the Social Imaginary*, 3.

20. Ibid., 25, 162.

21. Ibid., 35, 160–64.

22. De Peuter and Dyer-Witheford, "A Playful Multitude? Mobilising and Counter-Mobilising Immaterial Game Labour"; Idem, "Empire@Play: Virtual Games and Global Capitalism."

23. Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games*, xv, italics in the original.

24. Ibid., xxix–xxx.

25. For example, this is the case with SEGA, which is well-documented on Wikipedia.

26. Picard, "The Foundation of Geemu: A Brief History of Early Japanese Video Games"; Lauteria, "Assuring Quality: Early 1990s Nintendo Censorship and the Regulation of Queer Sexuality and Gender," 45.

27. "METI – Cool Japan Strategy"; "METI – Content Industry: Current Status and Direction of Future Development"; for a critical discussion, see Oyama, "Japanese Creative Industries in Globalization."

28. Fujimoto [藤本], *Shiriasu Gēmu*; Bogost, *Persuasive Games*.

29. In their *Ultimate Guide to Video Game Writing and Design*, experienced designers Flint Dille and John Zuur Platten urge their readers to "[r]emember that when you are creating content for an interactive medium like video games, there are expectations on the part of your audience: to be engaged. To be in control. To be playing. Of course, as in real life, control is an illusion or at best, a temporary condition, but it is one that humans like" (Dille and Zuur Platten, *The Ultimate Guide to Video Game Writing and Design*, 2).

30. Tane [多根], *Kyōyō toshite no Gēmushi*.

31. Endo [遠藤], "The Making of 80's Japanese Games~Create World~."

32. An example of this is *Final Fantasy XIII* from 2009, for which Mobygames.com offers a credit list with over 1,000 names ("Mobygames: Final Fantasy XIII Credits"). The scale of "AAA" title game development should be palpable from this, even if the list involves some vagueness regarding the area of release and the sources, and granted that some people involved might be listed twice.

33. Thon, *Transmedial Narratology and Contemporary Media Culture*, 135.

34. Ibid., 137.

35. Brian Schrank offers a substantial analysis of avant-garde videogames. He echoes Galloway's emphasis on the interrogative function videogames can have with regards to society and culture today, calling them "a principle site to expose, unwork, and rethink the protocols and rituals that rule technoculture" (Schrank, *Avant-Garde Videogames*, 4). Schrank distinguishes between radical and complicit, and between formal and political avant-garde games. To me, this distinction is not intuitive and, ultimately, leaves me guessing at the author's reasons at times. For example, I am not sure what to make of his framing of Wafaa Bilal's "Domestic Tension" as "complicit formal avant-garde" meaning as a work of "art for art's sake." In my naïve understanding of art, a work like "Domestic Tension," which involved the artist locking himself up in a room with a paintball gun remotely controlled by online "players," who could shoot him at will, is anything but formal—in particular when intended "to give a face to the Iraq war" (90–91). Radical political games, he contends, "recover something that we have collectively lost: radical play. Radical play destabilizes the entrenched patterns with which culture engages and plays with technology, allowing for alterior patterns to emerge and unrepresented subjects to become visible" (65). Complicit political games deploy "inviting, populist methods rather than the revolutionary tactics of the radical political avant-garde" to create playful attempts at utopia. In this, "the complicit political avant-garde is proactive—it creates the world in which it wants to live" but its works "do not fight to replace the existing" (113, 118–19). Despite its vagueness, this notion of the "radical political" is a helpful characterization of the interest I have in videogames. Rather than readymade visions (fantasies) of a different world, I scrutinize videogames for conflicts that point towards alternatives by destabilizing the existing order. The focus is thus not so much on the outcome, but on the conflict and its potential as such. However, given my argument that conflicts are

possible as a combined result of the game's and the player's specific context, it would be premature to limit the search to games implicitly or explicitly marked as avant-garde.

36. La Molleindustria, *Every Day the Same Dream*; Newsgaming.com, *September 12th*; for other examples, see also "Games for Change."

37. For a discussion of the local and global ties of Japan's early game industry, see Picard, "The Foundation of Geemu: A Brief History of Early Japanese Video Games"; for a discussion of the problem of identifying "Japanese" games by their aesthetic qualities, see Goto-Jones, "Playing with Being in Digital Asia"; for a discussion of the globalization of videogame production itself, see Wolf, "Introduction," 12.

38. For a recent, nuanced and insightful discussion on the challenges "Japan" poses as a conceptual and geographic framework, see Marc Steinberg and Alexander Zahlten's introduction to their edited volume "Media Theory in Japan" (Steinberg and Zahlten, "Introduction.")

39. Kitada [北田], *Kōkoku Toshi Tōkyō*.

40. Azuma [東], *Dōbutsuka suru posutomodan*; in English published as Azuma, *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*.

41. Itō [伊藤], *Tezuka izu deddo*; Nozawa, "Characterization."

42. Ōtsuka [大塚], *Teihon Monogatarishōhiron*; Ōtsuka [大塚], "Kadokawa Tsuguhiko to Mediamix No Jidai."

43. Steinberg, *Anime's Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan*; Picard and Pelletier-Gagnon, "Introduction: Geemu, Media Mix, and the State of Japanese Video Game Studies"; Schules, "*Kawaii* Japan: Defining JRPGs through the Cultural Media Mix."

44. Against the background of the influence videogames had in Japan, it appears surprising that Azuma Hiroki laments in 2007 that there is still "surprisingly little work done that looks at 'contents' like manga, anime, light novels or games, as cultural expressions" (Azuma [東], *Kontentsu no Shisō*, 9, my translation). This has changed since, and with more scholars in Japan and elsewhere involved, the field of videogames in Japan is increasingly in the focus of game studies and other disciplines, both in Japan and elsewhere.

45. For a more detailed analysis, see Yoda, "A Roadmap to Millenial Japan."

46. Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 15–16.

47. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 1970, 28–29.

48. Ibid., 29. In the German version this sentence emphasizes the closure necessary for play even more explicitly, referring to the act as "self-contained" or "finite" [*in sich abgeschlossen*] (Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 2009, 19).

49. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 1970, 96.

50. Henricks, "Play and Cultural Transformation," 16.

51. Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, 3–4.

52. Henricks, "Play and Cultural Transformation," 16–17.

53. Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 5.

54. Wegner, *Imaginary Communities*.

55. Lefebvre (*The Production of Space*, 38–40) distinguishes three interrelated, but not necessarily coherent, dimensions of the social production of space, namely "spatial practice," which "propounds and presupposes" social space dialectically; "representations of space" or "conceptualized space," the space of scientists who "identify what is lived and what is

perceived with what is conceived," and "representational space," which is the space as directly lived or directly described. Corresponding to these are different modes of bodily engagement, namely perceiving of social practice, conceiving or thinking of representations of space, and living of lived space. According to Wegner, the middle terms of conceived representations of space "point toward what we […] conventionally think of as 'space' proper, mediating between and drawing all three of the levels together into a coherent ensemble" (*Imaginary Communities*, 14).

56. Wegner, *Imaginary Communities*, xviii.

57. Ibid., 37.

58. Ibid., 38.

59. Ibid., xx.

60. Galloway, "Warcraft and Utopia," 113.

61. McGonigal, *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World*.

62. Embrick, Wright, and Lukács, *Social Exclusion, Power and Video Game Play*.

63. For an overview of the concept, see Walz and Deterding, "An Introduction to the Gameful World." In Japan, Inoue Akito has published variously on this topic (Inoue [井上], *Gēmifikēshon*). For a critique of the term and its use, see for example Bogost, "Why Gamification Is Bullshit," in the same volume.

64. Galloway, "Warcraft and Utopia," 119.

65. Ibid., 120.

66. Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and De Peuter, *Digital Play. The Interaction of Technology, Culture and Marketing*, 36.

67. Virilio and Sans, "//.Dialogues./ the Game of Love and Chance: A Discussion with Paul Virilio."

68. Virilio's critique may be understood as part of a more general trend toward privatization that is often connected with a weakening of political activities aimed at improving life in common. Hannah Arendt (1998, 58), for example, positions the private sphere in direct, fatal opposition to the properly political public sphere, arguing that in mass society, "men have become entirely private, that is, they have been deprived of seeing and hearing others, of being seen and being heard by them. They are all imprisoned in the subjectivity of their own singular experience, which does not cease to be singular if the same experience is multiplied innumerable times. The end of the common world has come when it is seen only under one aspect and is permitted to present itself in only one perspective."

69. Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, 89–91.

70. Jameson, "Utopia as Method, or the Uses of the Future."

71. This means to believe in the power of what Kant calls "regulative idea" and in the principle existence of alternatives we may not yet be able to express fully. With Thomas Nagel, one may hold against sceptics of this position that "to deny the reality or logical significance of what we can never describe or understand is the crudest form of cognitive dissonance" (Nagel, "What Is It like to Be a Bat," 171).

72. Beiner, *Political Philosophy. What It Is and Why It Matters*, xxiii, italics in the original.

73. Ibid., x.

74. Ibid., xx.

75. Videogame worlds are as much part of our empirical experience as other aspects of life. Throughout this book, the phrase "non-game reality" is used to refer to the world outside of videogames.

76. I borrow the term "tactical theory" from Galloway, Thacker and Wark, who use it to refer to media capable of exposing the boundaries of mediation itself, and with whom I share the aim of trespassing in places outside of common cartography. Galloway, Thacker and Wark, *Excommunication*.

77. Said, *Orientalismus*; Sakai and Harootunian, "Japan Studies and Cultural Studies."

78. Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*, 63.

79. Carroll, *A Philosophy of Mass Art*, 413. This conclusion may be in line with Carroll's broad conception of imagination and his emphasis on the contrast between mass art and avant-garde art (Carroll, 207–9, 242–44).

80. Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 230–32.

81. Ibid., 231.

82. Suvin defines science fiction as "*a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment*" (Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, 7–8, italics in the original).

83. Suvin, 63, italics in the original.

84. Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 134.

85. Science fiction, Abe claims, is "a question of forming a hypothesis and then seeing to what extent you can erect a new system of rules, utterly different from the existing rules of our everyday lives. […] When a fresh hypothesis is brought in, the everyday is suddenly destabilized and begins to take on strange new forms. It becomes activated, objectified, and our consciousness is roughly shaken" (Abe, "The Boom in Science Fiction," 346).

86. With regards to videogames, Bogost touches upon a similar effect in his discussion of the medium's "procedural rhetorics," or the way in which videogames persuade by means of their rules.[86] Drawing on Alain Badiou's idea of the event "which offers a chance to disrupt the state of a situation and reinvent it, wholly anew, under a different organizing logic," he argues that the procedural rhetoric of a videogame "persuades when it helps discern the eventual site of a situation—the place where current practice breaks down" (Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, 58, 331–33). Unfortunately, Bogost does not pursue this argument much further.

87. Carroll dedicates a long section to analyzing Adorno's resistance to mass art, arguing that "the interlocking senses of autonomy and freedom that are fundamental to Adorno's theory of genuine art and to his dismissal of mass art are fragments, albeit distorted fragments, of Kantian aesthetic theory" (*A Philosophy of Mass Art*, 105). The following paragraphs show that Carroll is right in claiming that Adorno demanded of art to invoke independent thought and judgments. However, I hope to show that he formulates this demand for art and culture in general, rather than using it, as Carroll's discussion of Adorno suggests, to discriminate "mass art" merely due to its status.

88. Geuss, "Art and Criticism in Adorno's Aesthetics," 310–11.

89. Ibid., 298–303, 309–10.

90. Adorno, "Resignation," 202.

91. Adorno, "The Culture Industry Reconsidered," 106.

92. Adorno, "Free Time," 193.

93. Adorno, "The Schema of Mass Culture," 63.

94. In "How to look at Television," for example, states that "the present rigid division of art into autonomous and commercial aspects is itself largely a function of commercialization" (Adorno, "How to Look at Television," 159). More generally, this claim appears in his speech on *Free Time*, where he argues that, in modernity, free time is being detached from work life deliberately, in order to make it a target for commodification. Such practice of categorizing and dividing is, in his view, related to the dominant current in society: "the prevalent ethos [*herrschender Geist* ("Freizeit," 648)] is suspicious of anything which is miscellaneous, or heterogeneous, of anything which has not clearly and unambiguously been assigned to its place" ("Free Time," 190). Likewise, his ideal of art is not that of high art, but rather of a field of art that encompasses various forms and contents, because only by containing them, does it allow them to contradict each other. Claiming that art can only be critical of society if it is part of society, not detached from it, Adorno ("Culture and Administration," 116–17) agrees with Paul Valéry that true art can only exist where it abandons its ambition to be art.

95. Indeed, invoking magic and religion can, in some cases, exercise a critical or disruptive force against the status quo. For example, Eugene Thacker and McKenzie Wark convincingly deploy horror fiction and heresies in an assault on philosophy and science. Galloway, Thacker and Wark, *Excommunication*; see also Roth, "Review of Alexander R. Galloway, Eugene Thacker and McKenzie Wark, *Excommunication*."

96. Goto-Jones, "Alien Autopsy," 23. As science fiction author Orson Scott Card puts it, both "science fiction and fantasy stories are those that take place in worlds that have never existed or are not yet known." However, he adds, "science fiction is about what *could* be but isn't; fantasy is about what *couldn't* be" (Scott Card, *How to Write Science Fiction and Fantasy*, 18–22).

97. Freedman explicitly distinguishes science fiction (sf) from other genres due to this quality, arguing that "the SF world is not only one different in time or place from our own, but one whose chief interest is precisely the difference that such difference makes, and, in addition, one whose difference is nonetheless contained within a cognitive continuum with the actual (thus sharply distinguishing SF from the irrationalist estrangements of fantasy or Gothic literature, which secretly work to ratify the mundane status quo by presenting no alternative to the latter other than inexplicable discontinuities)" (Freedman, "Science Fiction and Critical Theory," 186–87).

98. Comparing science fiction to critical theory, Carl Freedman argues that both deploy critique "in order to clear space upon which positive alternatives to the existent can be constructed" (Freedman, 188).

99. Roberts, *Science Fiction*, 148, italics in the original.

100. Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, 64–65; Abe, "The Boom in Science Fiction," 346.

101. For a more detailed discussion, see for example Pavel, *Fictional Worlds*, 46–57.

102. Arsenault, "Video Game Genre, Evolution and Innovation," 159.

103. Ibid., 155.

104. Hichibe [七邊], "Bunkasōzō No Jōken"; Idem, "Possibilities of Sustainable Small-Scale Game Development." Hichibe shows that the average cost of one title doubled from PlayStation to PlayStation 2 (from about one hundred million Yen to two hundred), but multiplied with the birth of the PlayStation 3 generation of consoles and more drastically with the generation that followed.

105. Hichibe [七邊], "Possibilities of Sustainable Small-Scale Game Development," 171.

106. Rämisch, "Game Publications by Platform and Year (MediaArtsDB)." Created by processing the "Media Art Database." For more information about the project, see "Diggr – Databased Infrastructure for Global Game Culture Research."

107. Computer games are an intriguing, highly politically charged field in Japan. In the vivid field of independent productions and amateur activities, for example, some titles reach astonishing levels of popularity. At the same time, these activities constitute a crucial playground for future game designers and programmers which, to some extent, exists outside of market logics and societal restrictions such as videogame rating and censorship. However, due to its subcultural status, this field is less accessible and thus requires a very different approach that is out of reach to this project.

108. Schrank, *Avant-Garde Videogames*, 182–83.