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Breaching Familiar Horizons

In this book, I asked whether videogames can contribute to our imagination of alternatives to the status quo, which, in turn, might provide direction for political action toward a better world. I have used the idea of ideational videogame space as a perspective on videogame expression and my own play, enhanced with other resources, as a way of accessing and experiencing this space. I hope to have shown that videogame spaces can indeed make distinct contributions to the imagination of alternatives, and offer intriguing perspectives on the foundations of contemporary life in common. In these final pages, I would like to revisit some of the implications these findings have on my claims about media specificity, political philosophy and, lastly, on the quest for alternatives.

The analysis has shown that videogames are a distinct and rich medium of expression and experience. Structurally, ideational videogame space draws its potential for conflicts—and thus for stimulating our imagination—from the specific ways in which designers, player and computer negotiate its contingency, dynamically and repeatedly. Here, videogame space appears distinct from other media, not least because its physical existence is much more fragile and, in turn, much more central than is the case with a variety of other media. Once printed, a book can, generally, be preserved in the same physical form, whereas a videogame space, which exists for the player in accessible form only in the computer memory, is necessarily instantiated and may thus potentially be different each time a player plays—saving the game offers some reconciliation, but remains limited to a specific situation and moment. This reasoning, to some extent, neglects the technical possibilities of today, both with regard to videogames, and with regard to books, which, insofar as they are distributed digitally, may be altered after the fact as well. But I maintain that the difference remains if we take these developments into account. With regard to structural similarities, online media, in particular search engines and social media, come to mind as examples of a similarly dynamic instantiation

of expressions based on design, input and computation. However, both spaces maintain several striking differences with regard to their expressive means, architectures and modes of engagement, even if we consider that the "ludic" is taking over ever more areas of culture today, as Raessens and others have argued.[1]

Another source of conflict is the diversity of expressive elements videogame spaces combine. Specifying ideational videogame space in this regard helped to highlight some of the ways in which videogames host otherness and afford its active exploration on many levels of sensual representation, narratives and rules. If the cases discussed here can be seen as a serious and fruitful political philosophical engagement, they have also shown that, bluntly said, this engagement differs decisively from that found in a written text of a great thinker. In ideational videogame space, authorship becomes vague, even if we assign it to a collective, because the computer and the player contribute to generating this space. The literacy required to access and interpret videogame space is decisively playful and partly physical. Videogames have to be explored on their own terms, often involving creative player action and skills—if you fail to reach a certain area, you will not be able to find a conflict there and might not even know of its existence. Moreover, representation is partial and, to a certain extent, unimagined. In some cases, not even the designers are able to predict what is waiting for you. In sum, the analysis suggests that ideational videogame spaces can indeed contribute to political philosophical discourses, but only if we take them seriously in their difference to more established modes of thinking and, perhaps, also of imagining. In this sense, their potential lies not in offering ready-made models of a better world, but in prompting our active, playful exploration of conflicts, which may disrupt us and inspire us to imagine alternatives to the status quo as we know it. Successful videogames in this respect are interventions that point beyond the status quo, without offering one final, authorized model. To follow Adorno, they invite open thinking and rethinking of established ideas and foundations of life as we know it. Importantly, this open thinking is simultaneously an exploratory "acting"—the two are hard to separate in the engagement with videogame space. While writing and thinking may be conceived as action, too, videogame spaces help us reconsider and experience this relation in a different way and provide a different access point to political philosophy. Boldly put, in videogame space the "love of wisdom" (philosophy) is arguably more directly related to (the experience of) physical action than in other mediated contexts. Moreover, it is a space in which

thoughts and actions of different actors collide. The attribute "ideational," thus, may be misleading, because this space is as much about action.

The cases I analyzed approximate this potential to exploratory thinking and acting in intriguing ways, generating ideational spaces ripe with conflict. This hospitality to conflict is not arbitrary or abstract, but specifically related to the qualities of videogame space in at least two ways. First, the games in question "succeeded" precisely because each of them explored the qualities of videogame space in a specific way that, at the same time, posed a specific challenge to the limitations and boundaries of the medium videogame. Put differently, some games are closer to Muroi's notion of "intervention" than others, because their designers embedded in them a certain self-reflexivity and curiosity about the historical and cultural context in which they are created.

Second, and maybe more important, is that the concrete issues these games speak to are not random. Instead, they account for some of the more specific expressive potentials of videogame space, which are derived from the centrality of narratives, rules and representations. All examples considered in the case studies of Chapters four, five and six, combine these three elements in specific ways in the negotiation of videogame space, each opening up a distinct space for player exploration and experience. In *Shadow of Memories*, the player is invited to explore the idea of narrative—and with it, the idea of linear time—in action. In *Rez*, the *Earth Defense Forces*, and *Neon Genesis Evangelion 2*, the player is variously confronted with the performance of the computer and its ability to enact the unimagined, contributing to decisively alienating experiences. In the *Metal Gear Solid* series, the player is able to experiment and interact with various forms of rules and rule-based behavior, and experience the absence of such rules for brief moments. In all cases, the repetitive or "same-but-different" nature of videogame space contributes strongly to the possibility of conflicts and their experience. This suggests that videogames are most intriguing hosts to a specific set of issues.

Some of these issues are treated in a specific way because of the context of the developers—the *Metal Gear Solid* series comes to mind, because its lead designer Kojima Hideo links his games with his family history and their experience of war. Other games appear less discernibly inspired by the concrete contexts of their designers, and more work will be necessary to clarify that relation. In any case, the analysis pointed to the importance of the designers in the negotiation of videogame spaces. It seems to me that some of the most forceful, most disruptive conflicts discussed above result from the ways in which the

designers let go of their authority and actively explored videogame space as a partly unimagined structure. In *Shadow of Memories*, the choice to explore the narrative branches vis-à-vis the numerical goal of the game is left to the player, at risk of drawing their attention away from the content and toward a cluster of endings. In terms of aesthetics, the tension between analytic and unproductive play in *Rez* and *Eva2* risks boring the player. More importantly, the introduction of an A.I. relieves the designers of the task of envisioning and creating part of the game world (but it also negates the ability to control the game world). The last chapter on *MGS* combines both dimensions. The subtle critique of violence in the games is most powerful because it targets the player's expected—and invited—actions. At the same time, this potential risks being ignored or brushed away in frustration.

In all cases, the designers deploy a wide-reaching hospitality to otherness using the expressive features videogames offer. In my view, these design decisions go beyond the level of self-reflexivity regarding videogame culture—sometimes they appear bold and risky considering the centrality of entertainment in the videogame industry. Yet, it may be precisely this kind of risky, subtle, non-obtrusive engagement with the present and its foundations that, as far as I experienced it, has more lasting effects, because it does not confront the players with answers, but leaves it up to them to start asking questions.

Of all the games I played for this research, those selected for the case studies were the most explicit with regard to the political potential for conflict I am interested in. Some of these games, like *SoM*, *Eva2*, *Rez* or *EDF*, were created during a time I suspect of being highly productive in terms of diverse, exploratory games. Others, like *CT* and the *MGS* series go back further in history. I am unable to offer a full account of the various themes and tropes that developed in videogame culture in Japan and elsewhere over the years. It is worth pursuing these trajectories further, because, in some cases, this helps positioning a title in a larger history. For example, the disruptive conflicts in *SoM* are based on the idea of multiple endings, which was allegedly introduced in *CT*. Revisiting the original *Metal Gear* from 1987 after this research was completed was surprising for me as well, because many mechanisms that make for the distinct playing experience of the *MGS* series are already embedded in the early titles.

Nonetheless, if I had to guess, I would say that the richness of the disruptive conflicts and their possibility is enhanced by the later technologies of 3D

graphics, and the gradual expansion of expressive elements—better graphics, cut-scenes, etc.—which were gradually introduced during the 1990s, do contribute to the potential of videogames to confront the player with conflict on their own grounds. The alienation of *Eva2*, or the aesthetic experience of *Rez* are examples of this. Most directly, *EDF* suggests such evaluation, as it is based on a situation in which relatively performance-rich technologies for the Playstation 2 were widely available to developers. In any case, future studies will have to show how new technologies can contribute to different types of conflict.

In the final section, I would like to get up out of my cozy academic chair and consider the concrete stimuli the videogames I analyzed left me with. I mentioned above that they prompted me to ask questions that might be the starting point for alternative imaginations, and this is what I would like to do now. In *Shadow of Memories*, time is disrupted. Taking the implications of this experience seriously for a moment, I wonder how life in common might be structured if not in terms of linear time. At the end of some of the presentations on this research, I asked, what would it mean if each and every one of us had our own (social) time? This sounds like a neat idea, given that we never seem to have any time at all. But it is not meant as a reaction to or complaint about the business of life. What if this means something entirely different than being faster or slowing down? What if the very linearity of time is in question? What, in other words, if we really could all operate on a different, differently paced clock? Facilitating life in common under the assumption that linear time is not possible might entail finding ways—and taking more time—to communicate with and about each other much more in order to set common rules and goals. Technology might help coordination. On another plane, this starting point opens up a series of avenues and perspectives to think about, from individual relevancies (wasting time, saving time) to the race against time we are running against nature and its resources. But maybe this is already too abstract. On another level, that of narrative representation, non-linear time might mean that we stop assuming that any event, in particular when it involves more than one person, can be narrated "properly." What would it mean if any representation had to be conceptualized as a representation of multiple perspectives that may well exceed our sensual limitations? If (hi)stories are not "flattened" or "compressed" into one linear narrative, how would this change the weight and importance of individual accounts? What concepts of history, memory, perception and science are possible without linearity? Would this enhance plurality or ultimately generate confusion?

Rez and *Eva2* seemed to offer an experience of timelessness in those moments when I was freed of the game's goals. This is a space of boredom, but maybe only as long as we think the time spent there should be invested more "productively"—based on whose standards, you might be tempted to ask? This question of standards is more generally at work in these games, which confronted me with alternative logics of thinking and acting, the numerical sociality and the unreasonable npcs in *Eva2* and *EDF* making the most lasting impressions. They had a mirror-like function that showed me my own actions and behavior by contrasting it with a different, unfamiliar, alien one. Yet again, what if we took the alien—now that we know it—seriously, not just as an opponent to overcome or seduce, but as a representation of an otherness that does not abide by our (teleo)logics? The question is not whether we might find a better version of life in common in the other, but how we might conceptualize the social anew, in a way that does not centralize difference but rather "togetherness," even if mutual "understanding" is impossible. While thinkers like Donna Haraway, Ueno Chizuko or Martha Nussbaum ask similar questions,[2] the games I played leave the field of theoretical inquires and allowed me to experience alienness and develop strategies for dealing with it, and with the impossibility of mutual understanding. So, what if we were to abandon the idea of sameness or collective identity on a fundamental level? Could we do this without creating new hierarchies? What would it entail? What would we lose? Or, we could start from a different direction and wonder how far we are away from the numerical beings in *Eva2* today—what would it mean to surpass the measurability and numerical status our identities have in the face of bureaucracy?

This question relates the interaction with the alien to the experience of rules and freedom in *MGS*. The question this series sparked in me was how responsibility might function more pointedly in the absence of standardized rules. Is there a way of rethinking the notion of rules, without ending up in a situation in which the fittest survives, and without simply replacing one set of rules with another? Could the freedom gained by abandoning the rules be meaningful as a freedom of political action, which would require us to maintain a sense of common life and common space. Or, could we at least think of the experience of acting within a space devoid of rules as an experience that inspires us to think of a set of rules we would like to apply? Could determining these rules individually and finding ways to communicate and negotiate them—instead of taking their universality for granted—be a central building block of a community? What if the authority came from the negotiation, not from the (already existing) rules?

To be sure, such processes do take place, but often in a limited way, within existing structures.[3]

If these questions or possible starting points for an alternative imagination seem to point to generic questions—the conditions created by capitalism, discrimination and differentiation, and the role of the state for society, which are the three central constituents of the contemporary system if we believe Karatani[4]—this is, in part, because they question the current system on a fundamental level. It may also result from the difficulty of translating my experiences into a theoretical and conceptual language—anything less would probably disarm my argument about media specificity and my insistence on the experiential potential of the medium. However, their applicability is much more concrete than the description might betray. The current situation in many places around the world appears to be defined by breaking with traditions and common sense, by perceived threats to established principles and understatements, and by the crumbling of former certainties. This is at least one of the factors contributing to the recent rise of nationalism in Germany, and probably elsewhere, as far as I understand it. If we do not want to return to past versions of society or establish new boundaries within it, one possible way forward might be finding new ways of negotiating diversity, new ways of enduring difference, and new ways of communicating and interacting. For me, the videogame spaces discussed, each in its own way, did clear a path and thus provide a starting point for my alternative imagination.

Notes

1. Raessens, "The Ludification of Culture"; Zimmermann, "Manifesto for a Ludic Century."

2. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto"; Ueno [上野], "Datsu Aidentiti"; Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice*.

3. Stalder, *Kultur der Digitalität*.

4. Karatani, *The Structure of World History. From Modes of Production to Modes of Exchange*; Karatani, *Auf der Suche nach der Weltrepublik*.