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1 Introduction

What makes man a political being is his faculty of action; it enables him to get together with his peers, to act in concert, and to reach out for goals and enterprises that would never enter his mind, let alone the desire of his heart, had he not been given this gift—to embark on something new. (Arendt 1970, 82)

Are we political beings? Today, to embark on something politically new, something geared towards fundamental change in our common reality, is a task fraught with difficulty. To be sure, politics have not vanished from society and decisions for social, cultural, economic and foreign policies are still made every day. It would be wrong to deny that the capitalist system can be—and has been—politically influenced in innovative ways to improve peoples’ conditions. However, in most cases, these decisions merely seek to adjust the existing system rather than aiming for change and alternatives. Despite its contradictions and the problems it causes, capitalism, often in combination with neoliberal philosophy, is increasingly global, pervading more and more into society and culture. The recent tendency in universities in Europe and elsewhere exemplifies this trend towards economizing, standardizing, and evaluating everything and anything. Yet, knowing of these problems and experiencing them first-hand is one thing, conceiving different paths to follow and pursuing them, another.

In my personal experience the most striking recent example of the force and persistence with which the current social, economic and political system dominates almost all areas and layers of society is the development in Japan since the tragic events of March 11, 2011. The horrible nuclear accident in Fukushima not only confronted Japanese and other societies with an ongoing, uncontrollable man-made catastrophe, the harmful effects of which remain unpredictable to this day. The disaster also directly brought into the open the virulent problems of a post-war system strongly focused on economic profit. It confronted us with the almost inescapable totality of the current capitalist system’s reach, with its fierce competition, under which manpower and employment are as essential for individual survival as electric power and automated production are for the nation’s.

In stark contrast to the many creative grass-roots movements and alternative groups that emerged from the experience of the nuclear threat and have contributed
immensely to the political climate in Japan since, I cannot help but have the impression that the overall direction and more recent political developments have tended towards restoring the status quo. That this return was not motivated by an understandable individual desire to come back to some kind of everyday normality after weeks and months of uncertainty and threat, but justified with a necessity to restore economic competitiveness for the sake of society even at the risk of the lives of some members of society, demonstrates the vigour and vitality of the capitalist system even in severe crises, and the overall lack of viable alternatives.

Finding strategies against the currents of the contemporary system may, to a certain extent, be a question of individual creativity—and here, successful attempts are fortunately numerous. Yet, these successes are local and often temporary, and cannot solve our problems on the larger level of society, let alone on a global scale. What is more, there is reason to believe that the lack of alternatives is not an issue of individual creativity alone. Thinkers like Theodor Adorno, Paul Virilio, and Hannah Arendt have long observed that political thought and action are under increasing threat by schematization, acceleration, bureaucracy, and capitalism. Frederic Jameson (2007, 228) goes even further, claiming that the future is not an imaginary space for alternative scenarios any more, but neutralized in its potential for change: the unknown future becomes “a new area for investment and for colonization by capitalism.” Like Jameson, Japanese philosopher Karatani Kōjin (2012, 11) claims that we not only lack viable alternatives, but have lost the capacity to imagine anything outside the current system.

Arendt’s introductory quote hints at the importance of novel goals and ideas for political action. Yet, if we are increasingly unable to imagine such alternatives, how can they be pursued? In my opinion, any system that is without alternative is deeply unsettling, regardless of its content. Against this background, the underlying question for this project is: can we imagine a society or world radically different from ours? Although thinking about real alternatives to capitalism is often either branded as driven by traditional ideologies, or regarded as romantically naïve, idealist, pessimistic or oppressive, my approach is guided by the belief that the “colonization of the future” is not yet total. Turning to an innovative market and a politically acclaimed genre, this explorative project asks if Japanese science fiction videogames and their expressive possibilities are a potential source of inspiration and stimuli for imagining radical alternatives to the status quo and the known, which can serve as the basis for political action.
As a relatively recent field of popular culture, videogames have rapidly developed into a sophisticated technological medium of artistic expression and interactive play (Tavinor 2009). Along with the rise of online networks, they have developed vast and complex social worlds visited and inhabited by millions of users. On the one hand, this has led to an ongoing discussion about their harmful effects on children, particularly in the context of violence and addiction. On the other hand, they have received attention as new tools for education, marketing, political communication, activism and advocacy, and for social and cultural simulation in general, whether framed as *Serious Games* (see for example Fujimoto 2007) or *Persuasive Games* (Bogost 2006a, 2007). On a wider scale, *Gamification* (see for example Inoue 2012) emphasizes the activating and motivating potentials of playful and goal-directed scenarios, advocating the deployment of game-like structures in all areas of society in general, and as new promising path for business models and consumer products in particular. From a similar perspective, Jane McGonigal (2012) discusses the ways in which 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 everyday lives.

The diversity of subjects mentioned above gives an idea of the range of academic disciplines and theoretical perspectives from which videogames are studied today. Many inspiring analyses have emphasized the richness and distinct quality of the experience videogames offer. However, as far as I can see, their ideational content and the contribution this experience can make to our imagination of political alternatives remains a minor concern in most discussions in game studies, addressed only in occasional examinations of individual titles. Even fewer attempts have been made from the perspective of political science and political philosophy (but see Frasca 2004, Galloway 2006, and in parts Bogost 2007 for stimulating exceptions). The following thesis aims to contribute to such attempts.

In order to contain the complexity of the issue, I focus on the single-player experience. This limitation to individual, private gameplay faces a severe criticism from the start. 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.

A similar warning comes from Paul Virilio (1999, no pn). In a discussion with Jérôme Sans, he 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.” In addition, Virilio 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.”

Although I don’t agree with Virilio’s evaluation of videogames, I believe Arendt’s implicit and Virilio’s explicit critique of the private, pre-defined character of videogame play must be taken seriously. Like Karatani, both authors fear a fading and perhaps even the end of the imagination and, more broadly speaking, the possibility of political action and political reason as such. However, while their view suggests that videogames are part of the problem rather than a potential solution, this thesis shows that the single-player experience of videogames and their expressive potentials can confront us with novel, politically stimulating experiences.

This task involves three steps or parts. In part I, I develop a theoretical and methodological perspective on videogames as ideational spaces. Following Jameson and Adorno, I argue that the kind of radical political imagination necessary today can be stimulated by disruptive conflicts between expressive elements of a medium. Based on an understanding of games as rule-based reifications of ideal play, I develop an understanding of videogames as ideational or computopic spaces, defined as the sum of all rules in the software. The consecutive sections qualify the computopic space as materially vague and contingent, partial and transformative in its representation, enacted by the player and performed by the computer. As such, any computopic space can be regarded as a universe which hosts a potentially unlimited number of worlds, one of which materializes based on player action and computer performance in each gameplay session. This makes
it dynamic, emergent and partly unimagined by its designer. In its expression, it combines multiple elements and is detached from our physical reality by virtue of its virtual, arbitrary semantics and its internal flexibility, which mark these worlds as an always already Other. In its active quality, the computopic space is experiential and emotional.

By way of access, chapter 3 outlines an empirical approach to the computopic space. Drawing on methodological discussions in qualitative research and ethnography, I propose a practical solution to the contingency and vastness of computopic universes, focusing on repeated, playfully-invading explorations, enriched by additional sources like walkthroughs and fan descriptions. I explain how these methods can be realized technically and how they are combined in the analytic process. In addition, I argue that the importance of transparency and openness, along with the distinctness of my material, demand for alternative modes of presenting the results. In response, I experiment with embedding video examples in the presentation of my results.

In part II, I turn to the field of Japanese videogames in search for concrete examples. Although recently declining, Japanese developments have long been a leading and influential source of innovation and creativity in global videogame culture, both in terms of hard- and software, making them a particularly promising field for disruptive conflicts. In order to deal with the vast variety and diversity of this field in the context of this explorative thesis, I propose to begin the inquiry in games aligned with the genre of science fiction, which is attested an explicitly political character by many critical theorists and literary critics. Adapting the characteristics of science fiction to the context of videogames, I pre-select a range of titles in a review of recent statistical data on videogame sales, further refined as to comply with the methodological and methodical constraints. Based on this pre-selection in chapter 4, I discuss several major tendencies in the field of Japanese sf games in chapter 5. Given the dominance of robots, so-called mecha, in Japanese sf games, I explore the ways in which they are deployed in dystopic scenarios.

The findings of chapter 5 serve as a guideline for the detailed analysis of disruptive conflicts in part III, where I focus on the sf tropes of time travel, the alien, and war technology. While the strategies vary, all chapters draw on thematically related works of recent political philosophers and discuss the ways in which the combined expressive elements of selected titles present the issue at hand in disruptive conflicts capable of stimulating our radical imagination.
With this approach, I aim to show that videogames can be put into dialogue with radical thinkers such as Paul Virilio, Paul Ricoeur, Jacques Rancière, Hannah Arendt, or Giorgio Agamben in fruitful ways. The analysis shows that videogames can contribute to intellectual inquiries in various ways, stimulate our radical imagination, and offer sites of critique. This thesis aims to contribute to a further theoretical, methodological, and practical interaction between academic and pop-cultural forms of ideational expression, and to a critical perspective on videogame, which emphasizes their potential and, where necessary, holds them accountable for their lack of political creativity.