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3 Methodology and Methods

Neo: Is that...
Cypher: The Matrix? Yeah.
Neo: Do you always look at it encoded?
Cypher: Well, you have to. The image translators work for the construct program, but there's way too much information to decode the Matrix. You get used to it. I — I don't even see the code. All I see is blonde, brunette, redhead...Hey, you want a drink? (The Matrix 1999, quoted from Wikiquote 2013)

In the first chapter, I have established the computopic space as a theoretical framework and pointed to its distinct potentials for radical Otherness and productive conflicts. The following chapter discusses the methodological and methodical demands this space puts on the concrete analysis of a given computopic universe. With their contingency, world plurality, active and partly unimagined character, computopic universes confront the ‘scholarly’ analysis with several difficulties. Due to its contingent existence between hardware, software, and partial representation, the computopic space lacks a well-defined object of study that can be located and delimited. In addition, each universe potentially offers myriad worlds, some of which differ significantly. This might be problematic in a space in which I as a player-researcher have an immediate, materially generative influence on each world I experience: as a player, my choices in a game have a direct effect on where I go or can go, what parts of the universe I see and don't see, explore or choose to ignore. The following chapter discusses these issues and offers theoretically informed, practical solutions for the analysis of the computopic space. By way of doing so, it also takes a stance with respect to what I regard as a scholarly attitude, including the issue of presenting the results to an audience, you the reader.

3.1 Ethnography as Context

At the outset, the features of the computopic space and its demands on the analysis suggest a structural similarity with anthropology and ethnographic research. Ethnography is "an approach for studying everyday life as lived by groups of people" (Boellstorff et al. 2012, 1). Since the space I analyse is not populated by human be-
ings, some of its central methodological and ethical concerns, such as the anonymity of the subjects, as well as a large part of its methods geared towards collecting data from or of other living beings, do not apply here. However, in terms of flexibility of the exploration, as well as the process from fieldwork to data interpretation, provides a blueprint for this project and can offer help with several important methodological problems.

For some ethnographers, such borrowing may appear threatening. “With far more researchers adopting ethnographic methods than those who have been formally trained in those methods—in either its historic anthropological or sociological traditions—the irony is that its popularity threatened to undermine its validity and effectiveness” (Marcus 2012, xiii, see also Boellstorff et al. 2012, 3). Yet, while this statement refers to the danger of deploying the notion of ethnography as a “license to indulge speculation in a more authoritative guise” (Marcus 2012, xiv), I have no intention of claiming that my methodological or methodical considerations are adequate on the grounds that they draw on an established methodology—nor am I convinced of the effectiveness of such strategy; the usefulness of methodological claims and methodical decisions has to be proven in the analysis. Instead, I draw on these discussions because they frame research as a mode of discovery, which draws its questions from the fieldsite (Boellstorff et al. 2012, 32). Given the character of the computopic, this emphasis on explorative approximation is crucial as a guiding principle for my methodology.

3.2 Too many Worlds

In *The Matrix*, those who rebel against the computer system have learned how to read the real-time stream of code on the screen—they imagine what an algorithm would look like in the 3D virtual environment of the Matrix. In lack of such faculty, I have to find other ways of accessing the computopic universe. Whereas a large part of literary and media studies deals with contained objects or texts, the number of worlds and representations a computopic universe hosts is neither known, nor consistent over different titles. It is also not fixed, since the computopic worlds encountered at play are not entirely determined by the designer. A major aim for the methodology is thus to find an approach adequate to dealing with the ontological vagueness of the computopic space and its contingency, and to derive respective methods from this approach.
This section develops such methodological approach and suggests concrete methods for exploring a computopic universe. To begin with, I believe that the character of the computopic space requires an engagement guided by principles similar to those listed by Hine (2000, 63-65) for *Virtual Ethnography*, which she regards as an “adaptive ethnography which sets out to suit itself to the conditions in which it finds itself.” She demands that such ethnography has to be mobile, with its object shaped in terms of flow and connectivity rather than location and boundary as organizing principle. Boundaries are not assumed but explored in the process, the idea of a complete ethnography of a given object has to be abandoned, each decision means to reformulate the object itself. Virtual ethnography is necessarily partial and “[p]ractically, it is limited by the embodied ethnographer’s constraints in time, space and ingenuity” (64). At the same time, “[t]he shaping of the ethnographic object as it is made possible by the available technologies is the ethnography. This is ethnography in, of and through the virtual” (65).

These demands on virtual ethnography are helpful guidelines for the engagement with the computopic space, because they stress the openness and flexibility of the inquiry, its explorative and intervening character, as well as its partial, technology-based access and its practical constraints. With regards to the first shared feature of contingency and indefiniteness of the object, we find a radical specification of the respective methodological openness and flexibility in the writings of Jacques Derrida. In “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” Derrida (1992) discusses the problem of defining a field without knowing its content, deploying the concept of play to this end. He distinguishes two kinds of structure, namely the centred structure based on “sure play,” and the non-centred structure and its “play without security.” In his analysis, “[t]he concept of centered structure is in fact the concept of a play based on a fundamental ground, a play constituted on the basis of a fundamental immobility and reassuring certitude, which itself is beyond the reach of play. And on the basis of this certitude anxiety can be mastered” (1117). Such “sure play […] is limited to the substitution of given and existing, present, pieces” and “seeks to decipher […] a truth or an origin which escapes play” (1125). In contrast, non-centred play “plays without security” and “is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name man being the name of that being who […] has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of play” (1125).34

34 The similarity Derrida’s approach shares with Gadamer’s understanding of non-human
This theoretical dichotomy is a useful framework for thinking about the problem of openness and flexibility of the analysis. Similar to the concept of utopia (see Wegner in chapter 2, p. 20), the computopic space occupies a middle ground between two extremes. Finite and limited by its software, it is nonetheless plural and open-ended in its instances. On the one hand, this means that abandoning the search for origin or inclusive comprehension and thus bearing anxiety is a necessary condition of access. However, its structure is nonetheless limited, rigorously defined and reflected in each instance.

A similar structural tension in works of music is one of the main concerns in the philosophy of music, which may provide some helpful suggestions for the approach. In his discussion of the ontology of a work of music, Stephen Davies (2003, 58) states that “[t]he composer [in my case the designer; mer] provides the event specification from which the work takes its identity, but it is the performer [respectively the player-researcher and the computer; mer] who executes this specification and thereby generates tokens of the work.” Analysing this difference between the work and its performance, he concludes that

ontologically speaking, it is the nature of the work that determines these properties of its instances by virtue of which they are its instances. The epistemic process goes in reverse, however. We come to know the work through its performances. We abstract the work from its instances, stripping away from its performances those of their properties that are artistically irrelevant, and then stripping away those artistically relevant properties that are properties of the performance but not properties of the work, thereby exposing the work and its properties. (68)

A work in the case of the computopic space is the computopic universe, meaning the sum of all worlds a software program facilitates. As such, it is only open to access by the computer. However, as a player-researcher, I can influence the play as to-and-fro movement (see chapter 2, p. 17) supports Derrida’s (1992, 1117) own remark that “one cannot in fact conceive of an unorganized structure.” Yet, rather than criticizing Derrida’s concept of play as a modern idealization, as Sutton-Smith (1997, 148) does, I propose to take it as a radical intellectual challenge or desire to conceive of a no-place or utopia—a space which cannot be grasped spatially. Even play does not entirely serve its purpose here. As Sutton-Smith rightly claims, defying conventional expectations merely means to play by some other rules, and a player can only be playful in the first place, if he is “in a known, rule-bound play context” (150). However, I believe that the idea of pure, insecure play can still inform the research process and shape my attitude to the computopic universes I visit, emphasizing the value of intense exploration and its infinite nature at the same time.
performance directly and am, at the same time, its audience. This double character of the player-researcher provides me with the possibility of actively exploring and generating multiple worlds, as opposed to an audience which can only rely on an external performer’s choices. In turn, playing is also a part of the experience and as such, in a sense, of computopic expressivity. This suggests that playing is both the most effective method of exploration and the one most adequate for accessing the breadth of expressive elements and potentials of a computopic universe, including the dynamics of action, tension and involvement.

Against the background of Davies’ understanding of the epistemic process, a first demand on the analysis of a computopic universe is that it has to be based on an exploration of multiple worlds, which are then extrapolated and abstracted from. In order to map the computopic universe, I have to develop what Davies (2003, 214-215) calls “an awareness of the overall pattern of […] events. It is the recognition of repetition, similarity, instability, emphatic closure, and so on (but not necessarily of the technical devices by which such results are achieved), and more generally of patterns that emerge from successions of such events, that amounts to the recognition of musical form.” Whereas ethnographic research focuses on participation and observation, this suggests a more active mapping. Maintaining openness in the analysis, I propose to adapt Derrida’s notion of play without security not only on a methodological level, where it informs an open and explorative approach, but also on the methodical level. Here, the exploration of the computopic has to be a playfully invading one rather than participatory-observing, not only playing the game multiple times, but also playing with its rules in search of its structures and boundaries.

The proposal to accept the anxiety of pure play in the analytic exploration remains an important guiding principle, placing the responsibility for any decisions with regards to direction and quantity of the data collection in my own hands. In emphasizing my own play, I highlight the fact that my experiences of a computopic universe are different from other player's experiences due to my interest in videogames as political spaces. In the sense that I am interested in disruptive conflicts as a potential rather than a widely shared experience, the approach adapts Carroll’s (1998, 271) view, who argues that identifying a specific

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35 This is not to say that ethnographers ignore their influence on the field. In fact, the role of the researcher has been subjected to long and ongoing discussions, to which I come back in the next section.
structure or element in a work “is a matter of textual analysis, albeit against the cultural and biological background in which the text is produced. It is not a matter of sociological polling.”

However, to the extent to which the computopic space is non-textual and materially contingent, this approach remains very limited. More than the warnings of ethnographers that qualitative and subjective approach should not be mistaken for an invitation to dilution of the empirical data or ungrounded speculation (Marcus 2012, xiii-xiv), this contingency is an issue due to the time constraints this project is under. Many of the computopic universes analysed below offer several dozen to several hundred hours of distinct experience. In addition, the emphasis on the subjective quality of the engagement not only marks playing as a preferred method of engagement, it also gives reason to believe that other players may access different worlds and have different experiences. As a practical counter-measure, both exploration and primary data are expanded on and enhanced by additional materials on the games, such as handbooks, walkthroughs, etc., and narratives of other players. Methodologically, this does not solve the problem of partiality, but it does allow for a triangulation36 of the data, thus offering a stronger empirical basis for my analysis, while maintaining the primary status of my own exploration.

3.3 Subjectivity and Experience

So far, I have identified explorative play as the main method of data collection, backed and enhanced by secondary sources about the respective computopic universe. This approach puts a strong emphasis on the role of the player-researcher. My actions within a computopic universe change the analytic process not only be-

36 In the context of qualitative social studies, triangulation refers to the use of multiple methods, perspectives, or types of data in the research process. This approach is expected to provide a better understanding of complex phenomena and subjects (see Rothbauer 2008). Summarizing the existing literature, Uwe Flick (2007, 519-520) refers to four types of triangulation: “data-triangulation”, “researcher-triangulation”, “theoretical triangulation” and “methodical triangulation. He argues that triangulation is not so much an aiding tool to strengthen validity claims (although originally designed as such), but rather an alternative to “validation strategies,” capable of elevating breadth, depth, and consistency of a methodical approach. For example, an empirical study of the significance of music in the everyday of teenagers, in which the interviews with the respective age group are complemented with a study of recent trends in popular music, allows the interviewers to ask more precise questions based on his or her first-hand knowledge, to understand the answers given better, and to respond to the answers given more adequately, thus potentially offering a deeper insight. Likewise, my exploration of the computopic space and its interpretation benefitted from the knowledge of the games and other players’ perspectives and observations.
cause my experience of these actions is part of the data, but also because my input influences the material worlds I can visit and explore—and the disruptive conflicts I am confronted with. In turn, my actions are influenced and informed by my experiences, intentions, emotions, and my skills as a player-researcher.37

Here, my methodology faces a potential criticism often voiced against ethnography and auto-ethnography, which emphasizes researcher subjectivity in all “fieldwork.” Boellstorff et al. (2012, 41) defy the criticism of subjectivity in ethnographic research, arguing that “[s]ubjectivity is an inescapable condition of science; no pure realm of objectivity exists in which interests, biases, predilections, concerns, attitudes, dispositions, conceits, judgments, axioms, and presuppositions of investigators are absent and without impact. We always begin from somewhere.” On the contrary, they claim that subjectivity is vital to ethnographic rigor, because it not only makes a position for the interpretation of data possible, but also provides a basis for intersubjective understanding of the outcomes and interpretations of an analysis (41-42). Against attempts to reduce ethnography to “personal experience,” they hold that even in auto-ethnography, where the ethnographer’s action is part or the central element of the collected data, such experience is always accompanied

37 A potentially interesting but equally intricate thinker in this respect is Henri Bergson ([English 1912, French 1896] 2004), who examined the relation between our actions and the image we perceive of the material world in Matter and Memory. Writing at the turn of the 19th century, Bergson was not accustomed to videogames. His biological terminology and many of the scientific findings his arguments are based on seem far outdated. However, I believe that his emphasis on action and his interest in the process of determining our course of action could provide an interesting perspective for the study of videogames in general and the computopic contingency in particular. For Bergson matter is “the aggregate of images, and perception of matter these same images referred to the eventual action of one particular image, my body” (8). Thus, perception is a kind of filtering process by means of which we arrive at a number of possible actions that can be carried out on the material world by “centres of real action, represented by living matter” (21). His emphasis on the enhancing effect the development of the nervous system has on our action possibilities both in terms of options and with regards to their ‘reach’ (21) seems surprisingly compatible with my intuition about the effect repeated ‘experience’ has in the computopic space, more distant areas of which become gradually available to the more experienced player. Bergson suggests that the growing richness of this perception symbolizes a “wider range of indetermination left to the choice of the living being in its conduct with regards to things” (21). This results in a functional filtering of action possibilities, which is, apart from bodily abilities and intentions, strongly influenced by memory (or experience), which amplifies the perception and make its speedy functioning possible, while at the same time a source of all kinds of illusions (24-35). I doubt that Bergson’s analysis of our neurological processes is correct in its details, but his interest in contingency, action and intuition suggests that he might provide an interesting model for conceiving the computopic space, although this discussion has to be left for later inquiries. Already, Bergson has an direct and indirect influence on game studies where it draws on his or Gilles Deleuze’s Bergson-inspired work in discussions of action and memory (see for examples Mukherjee 2011, 2008).
by analytic expertise (43-44).

While it would be too ambitious to reflect on and discuss these issues within such demanding and broad frameworks like phenomenology or empiricism, it nevertheless seems helpful to examine this relation between experience and analysis in more detail. For Jackson (1989, 2), lived experience is itself a critical attitude or method, because “[i]t remains skeptical of all efforts to reduce the diversity of experience to timeless categories and determinate theorems, to force life to be at the disposal of ideas.” However, this framing does not deny conclusiveness and closure its place: “Lived experience accommodates our shifting sense of ourselves as subjects and as objects, as acting upon and being acted upon by the world, of living with and without certainty, of belonging and being estranged, yet resists arresting any one of these modes of experience in order to make it foundational to a theory of knowledge” (2). Based on this conceptualization, Jackson introduces his version of “radical empiricism”, which methodically

includes the experience of the observer and defines the experimental field as one of interactions and intersubjectivity. Accordingly, we make ourselves experimental subjects and treat our experiences as primary data. […] As of our comparative method, it becomes less a matter of finding “objective” similarities and differences between other cultures than of exploring similarities and differences between our own experience and the experience of others. (4)

In addition to my general insistence on the status of the computopic as a space of experience in its own right, Jackson's discussion provides a strong argument for treating my experience of this space as primary data and basis for my analysis. As the cited discussion of ethnographic methodology shows, this should not be taken for a claim about the randomness of the collected data, but rather as strong responsibility for approaching this data analytically. Here, the emphasis on the disruptive conflicts emerging from the Otherness of the computopic space and its expressive elements serve as analytic framework. As these conflicts have to be found actively, a similar demand for methodological rigor needs to be applied to the exploration itself, which has to balance its intentional, “scientifically interested” invasion of the computopic universe with the frivolously playful mode of gaming as entertainment, which is itself part of the expressivity of the medium. Due to the absence of any guidance in this respect, the success of this balancing or oscillating between different modes of engagement can only be measured by its results. Jackson
urges us to acknowledge the limitations of all individual experience, calling for comparison with others as a way of strengthening findings and arguments. Here, my attempts at triangulation can only provide a surrogate. Ultimately, the analysis marks a first step, hoping to invite active interrogations by other researchers and gamers.

3.4 Data Collection and Interpretation

Based on these methodological considerations, it seems possible to outline the concrete analytic process from data collection to interpretation and the methods applied in each step. With regards to data collection, I have identified repeated playfully-invading explorations of the computopic as central element. As is the case in participatory observation of virtual environments (see Boellstorff et al. 2012, 69), access to the computopic can be very time intensive and demanding in terms of player skills. Insofar as computopic worlds only exist if they are enacted, this means that the skills of player-researcher determine the range of worlds and places he or she can access. Since these worlds exist only temporary during gameplay—although a specific place or situation may be revisited via save-files—they are transient spaces.

With regards to the first issue of skills, I would describe myself as an average videogame player. My skills have certainly increased over the course of this project, but in several cases, repeated attempts at a stage or situation were necessary to proceed in difficult games. However, where the lack of skills and the time consuming practice of repeated attempts threatened a fruitful and sufficient exploration of a computopic universe, I have resorted to walkthroughs and hints in order to gain more insights. As mentioned above, such walkthroughs themselves, among other secondary sources, have proven to be helpful additional materials for the analysis.

In terms of the second problem of the transient, temporary nature of computopic worlds, participatory observation usually relies on fieldnotes, which are used as primary data. Boellstorff et al. (2012, 82) urge their reader to be rigorous in their documentation: “If we fail to write it down, it might as well not have happened!” While this may certainly be true for social situations in which retrospective notes are the only option, videogames and digital media in general are compatible with data recording of various kinds. In this project, I counter the transient nature of the
computopic by recording my gameplay via a video capturing device.\textsuperscript{38} This allows for later comparison between different worlds, as well as playback of particularly interesting moments and sequences.

Yet, such recordings do not capture experience of the player, with its spontaneous, emotional, and physical quality. In order to secure a channel for additional comments on the experience and tentative thoughts and impressions of the games that does not interfere with the flow of playing—as pausing to take notes would—I used a headset connected to the audio out of the game screen\textsuperscript{39} and the microphone plug of a voice-recorder. I have sketched the setup in Figure 2.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{setup.png}
\caption{Technical setup for game exploration.}
\end{figure}

This setup facilitates clear in-game sound, without causing significant interference with my own audio-comments. Whereas using the audio-comment function that comes with the capturing device merges both audio streams, the

\textsuperscript{38} Specifically, I used the Elgato game capture HD, which is compatible with the PS2 and the PS3, and offers several options for recording quality. This is necessary, because I focus on console games rather than computer games, which could be captured with respective software.

\textsuperscript{39} The Asus VE 247 is one of the few full-HD monitors featuring both an HDMI-in and an audio-out port necessary for this setup.
advantage of the separate audio recording is the guaranteed clarity of both feeds, as well as the relatively small size of these comments, which allows for separate review. One of the disadvantages is, however, that synchronizing requires conscious effort and that multiplicity of devices introduces another potential source of corruption and technical problems.40

Following the initial data collection, I transcribed the audio comments on important sequences and worlds, and juxtaposed them with the video footage where necessary.41 This resulted in what Pavel (1986, 50) would call “books” about fictional worlds. Separating the states of affairs in a world from the statements describing these states of affairs, Pavel draws attention to the relation between both and to the limitations of representing fictional worlds, at the same time raising the question how these worlds are or can be represented to us, and which of their aspects might be difficult or impossible to describe. While keeping these limited capacities of video sequences and transcripts to convey the experience of videogame action in mind, I believe that these methods of documenting proved to be adequate means for making both the visited worlds and my individual and subjective experience of the respective computopic universes accessible to the analysis in a more permanent, textual form.

During the course of playing, analysing, and writing, I supplemented my own “books” with others, most notably secondary sources such as official and fan-based walkthroughs, online accounts of the games and game worlds in question, discussions in magazines, and on developer websites. These additions provide a stronger basis for my arguments, expand them or offer insights into and guides towards worlds or places I have not visited myself (yet). However, they are not aimed at covering the wide range of worlds and information about these worlds available on- and offline. While helpful as additions, these secondary sources are far from systematically collected data. Whether a more systematic approach leads to different results is a question for critical review and future studies.42 I have tried

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40 In particular, the capture device was subject to some fluctuation and instability in the early stages of the project. Furthermore, empty batteries in the voice recorder interrupted the audio-recordings a few times.

41 Initially, I expected one of the benefits of this method to be the possibility to merge the video/audio feed with the audio comments into a multi-layered video-document that could be analyzed in detail. Due to the length of the explorations and the amount of data they generated, this idea quickly proved impracticable for all examples.

42 Insisting on the necessary partiality of any account of the fictional, Pavel (1986, 53) himself gives reason to remain sceptical about the possibility of a full account of a computopic universe or even one of its worlds. On the contrary, he argues that in some cases, language
to schematize the analytic process in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Analysing computopic universes.

The search for disruptive conflicts was based on the theoretical framework developed above. As the figure indicates, the abstract expressive potentials of the computopic space were examined in concrete computopic universes and worlds. A flexible and emergent process of “finding, creating, and bringing thoughtful, provocative, productive ideas to acts of writing” (Boellstorff et al. 2012, 159), the analysis was conducted in consultation of various existing findings about the respective works, about games in general, and, most importantly, against the background of a wide range of works from the field of political philosophy.

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can be too limited to describe a world or universe. “An idiom containing a finite number of constants and no variables cannot describe a universe displaying an infinite number of beings; a language lacking quality predicates will prove inadequate for a universe containing colors.”
3.5 Intersubjectivity

I have mentioned intersubjectivity as an important principle in ethnography and qualitative research in an earlier section. As such, intersubjectivity does not only require a structured, analytic approach to the field and the interpretation of data, it also requires transparency. Given the strong factor of subjective interpretations and the lack of rigidity in the process of qualitative media research, this is a common goal with qualitative projects. For example, Bernd Schorb and Helga Theunert (2000, 40) emphasize the importance of strict and transparent rules in qualitative media research, and of the effort to make the research process visible (accessible) to external scrutiny. This project does not satisfy the strict demands these authors make, in particular because it does not meet their requirement that interpretations have to be negotiated between multiple researchers in the analysis. However, this should not suggest that their demands, or, more generally, the methodological principles of qualitative research, do not have to be taken seriously in a project that employs a similar explorative and interpretive approach.

Ensuring transparency does not mean to confront the reader with the collected data and the field notes I have made during the exploration. Boellstorff et al. (2012, 82) give a good reason against such practice, claiming that “it is the job of researchers during analysis and writing to select and contextualize data that will support their arguments, so that readers are not overwhelmed by a flood of detail.” This would certainly be the case here, as my primary data consists of approximately 350 gigabyte of raw video footage and 2 gigabyte of audio data, with a recorded play time of more than 150 hours.43

However, this does not imply that there is no meaning in providing insight into the analytic process beyond the textual narrative of the results. Several reasons suggest the opposite. First, the already mentioned openness of the computopic means that, theoretically, even players familiar with the games I discuss may not have encountered the situations I based the analysis on—or may be able to relativize or refute my generalizing claims based on their alternative experiences. Secondly, I refer to a number of games, which are not available outside of Japan. Thirdly, I am committed to communicating the results of this thesis not only to videogame experts, but also to an audience not familiar with games. Aiming to increase transparency, intersubjective understanding and openness in all these

43 The initial exploration of a wide range of games, including some of the examples, is not included in this number, because I did not record this stage.
dimensions, this project commits to exploring non-textual ways of presentation in the shape of a video documentary of crucial aspects in each computopic universe along with the written interpretation. Figure 4 shows the division of the screen and the function of its parts.

![Figure 4. Screen division and elements of the video examples.](image)

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<thead>
<tr>
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Each example includes the chapter title, a number with which it is referred to in the text, and a title. The left column contains an overview of the content of the example, as well as additional information about the respective content where helpful. Most of the right column is filled with the video feed. On top, I have included short explanatory comments on the scenes. Below the video feed, subtitles are given where the content is Japanese only. These subtitles are white, if they are taken from English game versions or respective dialogue scripts, and orange, where they are my own translation. Subtitle sources are given in a footnote with the first example that includes the respective game.

Some of the sequences are taken from the original data collection process, while others have been recorded deliberately for the purpose of showing aspects of a game. Although this account is selective and sometimes involves a considerable amount of manipulation and intentional performance, I nevertheless tried to subscribe to the principles that guide documentary film, such as authenticity and truthfulness. In this, I follow Louise Spence and Vinicius Navarro’s (2011, 2) argument that “what is at issue is not so much ‘Is it true or untrue?’ but rather ‘How
is actuality treated in order to sanction the documentary’s claims to be telling the truth?” And ‘How does the need to tell an effective story or make an argument encourage one kind of treatment over another?” They conclude that there is no intrinsic conflict between aesthetics and nonfictional representation (3).

I would like to add Carroll’s (1996a, 284-285) claim that selectivity is compatible with objectivity, if the relevant standards are maintained. Against the current of poststructuralist attempts to deconstruct the difference between fiction and non-fiction film, he argues that this distinction has to be maintained as a distinction between “the commitments of the texts, not between the surface structures of the texts” (287). In particular, Carroll rejects the sceptics’ critique that “the nonfiction film does not represent the world objectively, but proffers a surrogate superaddition in place of something called ‘lived experience’” (289). Convincingly arguing that it makes no sense to assume that a film can stand in for any lived experience in the first place, he proposes instead to emphasize the constructive act of selecting, which creates new meaning and knowledge, including the discovery of novel causal relationships which cannot be reduced to a narrative distortion of reality, because they are often grounded in the empirical (290-291).

With these arguments in mind, the attempt to include and experiment with alternative modes of presentation and respective media in this thesis is not only geared towards transparency and easier access to broader audiences. It also experiments with new ways of constructing meaning, taking videogames and the claims I have made about their non-textual quality seriously. As Jackson (1989, 186) remarks in a different context, “[r]ather than pretend there is no difference between science and art or argue that one can be epistemologically privileged over the other, we have to learn to play them both off against the other.” I believe this can be said about videogames as well. Rather than pretending that the experience of playing games can be described sufficiently or exhaustingly in academic prose, we should aim to find ways in which analytic accounts can be complemented and played off against other modes and channels of expression. In this project, the visual and sonic expressivity of the documentary videos creates a distinct alternative perspective on the issues at hand, thus complementing and adding to the interpretation and discussion significantly.
3.6 Conclusions
In this chapter, I have discussed the methodological difficulties the computopic space confronts us with and have offered a set of methods based on this discussion. Drawing on ethnography and qualitative research, I have argued for an active, playfully-invading approach to computopic universes that turns my experience into a central element of data collection. Acknowledging my subjective, physical and temporal limitations as a player-researcher, I have proposed to confront them as truthfully and faithfully as possible, both by enhancing my play with external sources, and by reflecting on the influences my own actions and subjective experiences have on the data collection and the analysis. Based on this, I have outlined the technical setup for the data collection and described the analytic process. Lastly, I have argued for an exploration of non-textual modes of presentation and explained my use of video examples throughout the thesis.

This approach does not solve the problems of the computopic contingency, nor can it fully account for the experiential dimension of gaming. However, it aims to engage with the subject of this thesis as truthfully as my own limitations and those of this project allow. By way of a brief reflection on the overall process, I would like to point out that initial observations made during the data collection process were of high value for the interpretative process, which underlines the importance of the voice recorder. The fact that the pool of data involved not only extensive visits to a singular computopic world, but also several different instances of a universe—sometimes multiplied by secondary sources—granted access not only to momentary computopic conflicts within an individual world, but also to such conflicts that develop across multiple worlds or over longer periods of time—in fact sometimes across multiple titles. This shows the profound expressive potentials of the computopic and supports the initial theoretical framing with its insistence on universal contingency.