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8 Technologies of Violence

The most radical change in the human condition we can imagine would be an emigration of men from the earth to some other planet. Such an event, no longer totally impossible, would imply that man would have to live under man-made conditions, radically different from those the earth offers him. (Arendt 1998, 10)

The computopic is a rule-based space of action. In the theory section, I have already referred to the peculiar tension between videogames as programmed reifications of play with their pre-determined character on the one hand, and the potential for creative action they facilitate on the other. Despite its rigidity, the computopic space may offer creative moments at play in its repetitive, exploratory, and often unguided character, and due to the complexity of its rules. This chapter asks what potentials and limitations these abstract characteristics of rules and action have for disruptive conflicts in concrete cases.

8.1 Action and Politics

Action is a central political term for many theorists and thinkers, because it is the way in which we can influence society most directly and deliberately—with Hannah Arendt, the way in which we embark on something new. While Raymond Geuss (see chapter 2, p. 31) favours a broad understanding of political action as action capable of creating a new situation, Arendt (1998, 175-176, 190-192) defines it more narrowly as characterized by novelty, “boundlessness” and “inherent unpredictability” and based on human equality in plurality. She distinguishes this sharply from behaviour as the dominant mode of human relationship in modernity, conditioned by bureaucracy and the dominance of the standardizing, equalizing “society” and its conformism. The victory of the conforming social over the pluralist political means that

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. (58)

Equally threatening to political action is the dominance of bureaucracy and a pseudo-science or computerized, calculated predictions of the future in the political landscape (Arendt 1970, 6-7, 29-30).

In a fully developed bureaucracy there is nobody left with whom one can argue, to whom one can present grievances, on whom the pressures of power can be exerted. Bureaucracy is the form of government in which everybody is deprived of political freedom, of the power to act; for the rule of Nobody is not no-rule, and where all are equally powerless we have a tyranny without a tyrant. (81)

Arendt (1998, 168-169) denies art a political potential on the grounds that it is always reified, dead thought turned into tangible, and a finite product rather than open-ended action. I believe Arendt’s claims about art in The Human Condition, in particular her argument that works of art are finite and do not reveal the author (a criteria she regards as crucial for action), to be questionable in general. However, this is not the place to deal with these fundamental questions about the potential and nature of artworks. Instead, I would like to take up her challenge specifically in the context of private (single-player) videogame (works) with their totality of rules, and examine the character of action found there. Arendt gives at least some reason to believe that even in her own account, videogames might have a potential for action when she regards theatre as “the political art par excellence,” because it is capable of imitating action (187-188). On a more abstract level, Arendt’s description of political action suggests that such action shares several characteristics with what I have referred to as ideal play.

The following sections examine the ways in which videogames might offer man-made environments for political action, to use Arendt’s terms from the introductory quote. As before, this potential is tied to the existence of disruptive conflicts, which confront us with situations in which we have to enact novelty. To examine the relation between rules and action within the computopic structure, I focus specifically on violence, which is a central theme in videogames and science fiction, and arguably the most controversial discourse in the context of political action. In preparation for the analysis, the next section introduces this controversy, relating it to the computopic space.
8.2 Dimensions of Violence

Violence is an important factor in many political theories. In his review of the various concepts of violence applied in academic writing, Vittorio Bufacchi (2005, 193) goes as far as to claim that “violence is, and has always been, the essence of politics.” Most prominently, Thomas Hobbes derives the necessity of a social contract from its dominance in the state of nature. Carl Schmitt’s (1933, 7) famous definition of the political as a distinction between friend and enemy is based on a commitment to eradicate the enemy by means of physical violence. Frantz Fanon ([1961] 2004, 2-3) argues that disorganizing society in order to decolonize it is always a violent process. “The colonized, who have made up their mind to make such an agenda into a driving force, have been prepared for violence from time immemorial” (3).

Like Fanon, many influential thinkers have regarded violence as political action because it seems to share with political action the effect of transgressing or interrupting “what otherwise would have proceeded automatically and therefore predictably” (Arendt 1970, 31). For thinkers like Georges Sorel ([1908] 1976)127, Frantz Fanon (2004), or Jean-Paul Sartre ([1961] 2004), this turns violence into a potential factor or even a legitimate requirement for radical change. Such notions of revolutionary violence have been promoted repeatedly as a promising or even the only possible answer to structural, systematic, or individual violence. Homi K. Bhabha (2004, ix-x) points out that Fanon’s insistence on national consciousness and homogeneity as necessary elements for the revolution of ‘the people’ is highly problematic in its denial of difference and cultural diversity.128 At the same time, he recognizes the influence Fanon’s ideas had, not only on movements like the Black Panthers, the IRA, but also in U.S. attempts to understand the enemy after the horrible events of September 11, 2001.

Bhabha emphasizes Fanon’s insistence on the “psycho-affective” dimension of violence, a realm which for him is “neither subjective nor objective, but a place of social and psychic mediation,” and which involves “the body, dreams, psychic inversion and displacements, phantasmatic political identifications” all alike (xix).

A psycho-affective relation or response has the semblance of universality and timelessness because it involves the emotions, the imagination or psychic life, but it is only ever mobilized into social meaning and

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127 See also John L. Stanley’s (1976) introduction to From Georges Sorel.
128 Fanon (2004, 10) believes that “[d]ecolonization unifies this world by a radical decision to remove its heterogeneity, by unifying it on the grounds of nation and sometimes race.”
historical effect through an embodied and embedded action, an engagement with (or resistance to) a given reality, or a performance of agency in the present tense.” (xix)

The term psycho-affective refers to Fanon’s (2004) framing of violence as a way of psychological and emotional resistance. In order to cope with being “dehumanized” and “reduced to the state of an animal” by the colonizer (7), the colonized dream “muscular dreams, dreams of action, dreams of aggressive vitality” to free themselves at least during the night (15). For Fanon the naked violence of colonialism “only gives in when confronted with greater violence” (23).

In contrast, Hannah Arendt rejects any kind of violence. She contrasts violence, understood as instrumentally enhanced natural strength, with properly political power, understood as the ability to act in concert (Arendt 1970, 44-46). In *The Human Condition*, Arendt (1998, 200) claims that “[p]ower is what keeps the public realm, the political space of appearance between acting and speaking men, in existence.” Violence, in her understanding, can destroy power but never become a substitute for it (202). Ultimately, it results in impotence (Arendt 1970, 53-54).

In his *Foreword* to the 2004 English edition of Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, Bhabha (2004, xxxvi) summarizes some of the existing positions and points out the complexity of the discourse:

For Arendt, Fanon’s violence leads to the death of politics; for Sartre, it draws the fiery, first breath of human freedom. I propose a different reading. Fanonian violence, in my view, is part of a struggle for psycho-affective survival and a search for human agency in the midst of the agony of oppression. It does not offer a clear choice between life and death or slavery and freedom, because it confronts the colonial condition of life-in-death.

It is not the aim of this chapter to rewrite this discourse or to aim for a synthesis of these opposing views and multiple dimensions pointed to here. Yet, in order to position violent action in the computopic space, it seems helpful to sketch some of the central characteristics and dimensions of violence.

Bufacchi (2005, 194) begins his review of violence with the observation that the etymologically correct meaning of violence, namely “passionate and uncontrolled force” is often combined with that of “violation” or infringement, “because acts

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129 Bhabha (2004, xxi) points out that Arendt’s (1970) rejection of violence was a direct response to Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* and Sartre’s pro-violent preface to it.
of excessive force frequently result in the violation of norms, rights or rules.” Consecutively, he identifies these two dimensions in literature, most of which either defends a narrow definition of violence as force, or a broad definition of violence as violation. In his discussion, Bufacchi points out that the narrow definition ignores important aspects such as structural and institutional violence, while the broad definition tends to be too inclusive to be distinct from any kind of misery, alienation, or repression (197-199).

Although Bufacchi concludes from this that “the concept of violence remains elusive” (199), this distinction helps to phrase some initial questions for the analysis of the computopic space. In the context of videogames, violence is frequently referred to in a discourse of negative psychological effects on children, at times even linked to tragic events like the school shootings in the United States or Europe. While this discourse, along with the research conducted in this field, more or less exclusively focuses on the psychological effects of videogame violence on the playing children and adolescents, this thesis aims to examine the political significance of action and violence within the framework of the rule-based, ideational computopic space. This does not mean that such connection between the psychological and the structural is not important. However, given the complexity of media effects discussions and the strong bias in much of the research done in this field, this discussion requires more expertise than I have and more space than I can grant it here.

This does not mean that I wish to ignore the physical and psychological dimension of violent action within these games. This might sound contradictory, given my emphasis on the virtual character of videogames. As spaces detached from physical materiality, how can they feature physical violence? I myself have expressed doubt about the possibility of videogames to express physical experiences (see chapter 2, p. 39). Yet, their virtual character does not mean that violent acts are not recognized as such in games, as they are recognized in film, even while knowing that actors only play. To the extent to which violence is carried out by the player, the situation appears even more complex, because it might carry with it an emotional, psychological aspect, identified by Bufacchi with the terms “passionate, uncontrolled,” and by Bhabha as “psycho-affective.” Neil Roberts (2004) examines this dimension in his analysis of Fanon’s (and Sartre’s) understanding of violence in more detail. He observes that for Sartre

[v]iolence is fundamentally an activity emerging from the category

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of agency. Agency here refers to one's ability to act. Beyond simply questions of acquiring control or potency, it involves a person's ability to make decisions. The capacity for agency, therefore, represents an important dimension of freedom and freedom's connection to anti-colonial violence. Those lacking subjectivity perform violence in order to gain agency. (143-144)

In order to grasp the significance and character of violence pointed to by Sartre, and Fanon himself, Roberts distinguishes between instrumental violence and intrinsic violence—the latter encompasses Fanon's framing of violence (144-147). Whereas instrumental violence refers to violence as a means to an end, acts of intrinsic violence contain inherent value and operate outside the means-ends continuum (145-146). I find it difficult to evaluate either Roberts' claim that “[f]or Fanon, violence is a necessary process for colonial subjects to achieve their own state of self-determination, decolonization, agency, and freedom in order to make this absence from colonial domination a reality” (155), or its consequences. Sartre's (2004) preface to The Wretched of the Earth helps to make sense of this difficulty, because he points out that Fanon does not write for those who are not oppressed. Addressing his fellow Frenchmen, he states that Fanon's book “often talks about you, but never to you” (xlv). However, Roberts' distinction between instrumental and intrinsic violence does nonetheless prove helpful for the analysis of the computopic space, because it raises the question of the emotional-affective character of action and the possibility of an intrinsic meaning within the rule-based, goal-directed space of the computopic, shifting the attention to the problem of whether such action can go beyond the means-ends continuum.

In its character as a rule-dominated, virtual space, the computopic seems to threaten not only the possibility of any action in Arendt's sense, but also the immediacy of physical and structural violence. After all, ‘it's just a game.' Switching off the console solves all problems and violence is never immediate, never a physical threat to the player. It would be mockery to compare voluntary gameplay with the situation of the physically, psychologically, or structurally oppressed, on the grounds of its strictly rule-bound character alone. However, this does not mean that violence in videogames cannot be significant from the perspective of political philosophy. My aim is not to argue that violent videogames are able to convey the experience of the oppressed or of violent acts in our empirical reality. On the contrary, the analysis inquires the status of action in videogames against
Part III  Analysis

the background of a stifling of political action in the everyday, focusing on the pervasive and controversial theme of violence precisely because it does not allow for simplified answers. Violence, here, is not a given, but rather an element the significance and position of which have to be established and embedded anew in this novel context of the computopic space.

I would also like to point out that, in line with the remarks on emotions in videogames made earlier (see chapter 2, p. 38), I do believe that videogames feature emotional or psycho-affective experiences like tension, horror, helplessness, or joy, and can convey violence, either in player acts or by other agents, on a cognitive level. Put differently, the player does recognize violence on the screen when he or she sees it, including its virtual consequences. The fact that such action does not come with the severe consequences it would have in our empirical reality and can be repeated endlessly might be seen as an invitation to trivialize, mock, or glorify violence—as is sometimes the case in the mecha games analysed in chapter 5. However, the following analysis of Metal Gear Solid shows how games can deploy the distinct qualities of the computopic space to reconfigure and restructure the various aspects of violence in critical and reflexive ways. Doing so, videogames can contribute to a novel, stimulating perspective on political action.

8.3  Structural and Instrumental Violence

In most videogames, violence is, first and foremost, instrumental. In other words, it is a more or less glorified means to an end—often the only possible way of proceeding in the game and reaching its goal. In Lost Planet 2 (2010), the player does not ‘discover’ the planet, but ‘conquers’ it. In the popular horror-series Biohazard [Resident Evil], the player fights undead creatures infected with a highly contagious virus. Traversing barren lands and seemingly abandoned villages in Biohazard 4 [Resident Evil 4] (2005), one is suddenly confronted with an assault from all directions. But despite the seeming inferiority of the player character, who, at least in terms of quantity, stands alone against an army, victory is possible thanks to superior abilities, firepower, and healing skills. While offering the player the terrifying horror of unexpected, ruthless attacks from behind, the game nevertheless makes him or her the intruder.

In these games, meaningful obstacles are created through the difference between the player character’s abilities and the enemy. The player has to conquer
the environment, often by destroying all enemy forces. A similar difference is also central to the *Metal Gear Solid* (hereafter *MGS*) series. However, here it is deployed in a slightly different way that prompts critics to regard it as a critique of violence (Miller 2006) and a counterexample to conventional shooters. As Derek Noon and Nick Dyer-Witheford (2010, 78) observe, *MGS* “emphasizes unobserved movement, subterfuge, camouflage, evasion, trickery, and out-smarting enemies, not just shooting everything that moves.” In the first section, I would like to examine in more detail this characteristic gameplay, which the designer has dubbed “tactical espionage action.”

*MGS* presents the player with a consistent world and an ongoing narrative about great conspiracies during and after the cold war, putting him or her in control of a genetically and technologically enhanced protagonist, who has to help avert a terrorist threat to global security in a one-man, covert operation. A hybrid between shooter and adventure, the series emphasizes sneaking and invisibility. The player has to direct the protagonist through hostile terrain, evading enemy soldiers, traps, as well as the vicious nature he is surrounded by. As Example 8.1 shows, *MGS* creates the gap between player character and enemy abilities mainly on two planes, namely sensual perception and action capabilities.

In terms of sensual perception, the player character, simply put, sees and hears more than the enemy. Part of this advantage originates from the combination of the various viewpoints the player can assume, like third person, first person, and limited birds-eye view, and his ability to use the environment as cover. The other part of

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130 *MGS* is a globally successful series of videogames developed under the direction of Kojima Hideo and released by Konami from 1998 (*Metal Gear Solid 1*, hereafter *MGS1*) onwards, with the most recent major release in 2008 (*Metal Gear Solid 4*, hereafter *MGS4*). Although the series is based on two earlier games called *Metal Gear* and *Metal Gear 2: Solid Snake*, this chapter focuses on the most important installments of the *MGS* series, namely *Metal Gear Solid* (1998, hereafter *MGS1*), *Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty* (hereafter *MGS2*) and *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater* (hereafter *MGS3*), both played mostly in the *HD Edition* (2011), as well as *Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots* (2008, hereafter *MGS4*). I refer to the *HD edition of MGS2* and *MGS3*, although I have also played the regular version of *MGS3*—the differences between the two versions are ignored below, in favor of clarity.

131 Naked Snake in *MGS3*, his son Solid Snake in *MGS1*, *MGS2*, and *MGS4*. *MGS2* introduces another operative called Raiden, whom the player controls through large parts of the game.

132 Whereas the visual field in third-person view is fixed in *MGS1* and *MGS2*, the player has control over it in *MGS3*, and *MGS4*. The higher degree of freedom achieved here, is carefully balanced by the designer as to not make the games too easy. Whereas the enemy forces could be displayed on the map in *MGS1* and *MGS2*, this feature is not available in *MGS3*, where it is replaced by a number of temporarily available sensors, and reappears only in form of a vague threat detector in *MGS4*. The tension created in *MGS2* while the player cannot access the map and thus does not see what is behind the next corner, gives way to a widening of the playing field and the introduction of more obstacles to the visual
the superiority stems from enhancements of technological and science fictional nature, like a map on which the enemy positions can be monitored in real time (MGS1 and MGS2), several types of goggles (MGS3) and other visual enhancements (MGS4), as well as active radar and a directional microphone (MGS3). Such enhancements also include the famous card-boxes the player-character can carry and ‘put on’ when in need of disguise in warehouses and storage rooms, as well as means of impersonation and camouflage in the form of a wide range of “suits” and “face paints” in MGS3. In MGS4, the camouflage is realized science-fictionally in a body suit called “octocamo,” which blends with the environment after a few seconds of idleness. These sensual aspects are complemented with a difference in action abilities and behaviour. In general, the enemies follow pre-defined routines and are astonishingly noisy, lazy and relaxed, given the circumstances. The player-character is by far more flexible and agile, and is able to traverse the environment silently and sneakily. In addition, a considerable part of his capabilities of forceful action are silent and can be executed from a distance and without being spotted.

Generally, MGS confronts the player with a series of more or less contained areas controlled and patrolled by human and robot enemies, which have to be traversed in order to proceed. To understand the significance of stealthy movement for the gameplay, it is important to know that discovery is a painful, time-consuming and often deadly experience. Example 8.1 shows that discovery is more or less likely to result in player-character death, or in time-consuming shoot-outs and extended run-and-hide, depending on the title and the situation. The player-character is spotted when crossing an enemy’s path or line of sight, or making suspicious noises at close range. To avoid detection, the games challenge the player to move carefully, to use the environment as cover, to perceive more than the enemies, to recognize their routines, and to know when to move and when to hide. 133 Although the player has superior means and often the benefit of the doubt, the gameplay is nevertheless

133 Although sensitivity is not limited to visuals, but further, increasingly in the later titles, includes audio-information, the latter seems to follow parallel patterns and will thus not be focused in the analysis. This omission should not detract from the fact that the audio-elements of the game are crucial and contribute to its experience beyond mere additions. In several moments during the games the importance the designer has attached to sound becomes apparent, for examples when a naked Raven sneezes due to the cold in a warehouse and thus gives away his position in MGS2, through the rumbling stomach that betrays Naked Snake in MGS3 once his food supplies run low, or through the awkward but noiseless crawling style in MGS4.
a thrilling experience, because in most cases, one can never be sure of all potential threats.

In all titles of the series, conventional gameplay is characterized by an almost tactile progression through the environment based on careful observation. Putting the opposing forces on rails—more limited than those of the protagonist—the games task the player with spotting and reading enemy routines correctly and finding tactical solutions for traversing an environment full of enemy sentinels, traps, and other obstacles. In this sense, MGS may be said to offer an experience of bureaucratic tyranny and its totality of rules. The player cannot but learn to understand the system, ‘behave’ according to its norms and rules, and adjust to its dynamics.

However, at the same time, MGS is an example of the potential of what Galloway (Galloway 2006), based on a short Postscript on the Societies of Control by Gilles Deleuze134, calls “allegories of control.” He believes that “what Deleuze defines as control is key to understanding how computerized information societies function” (88). For Galloway “video games are, at their structural core, in direct synchronization with the political realities of the informatic age” (91). Such “allegories of control” signify universal standardization because they substitute ideological critique by the logic of informatics control, identified as numerical representation, modularity, automation, variability and transcoding (99-102). While pointing to the similarity between the logics of videogames and social control, he also claims that, due to this proximity, they can make transparent the otherwise hidden “boring minutiae of discipline and confinement that constitute the various apparatuses of control in contemporary societies” (89). For Galloway, games like MGS—among other exceptional works he mentions—stand out because here, “to play the game means to play the code of the game. To win means to know the system. And thus to interpret a game means to interpret its algorithm (to discover its parallel ‘allegorithm’)” (90-91). Such games epitomize “the flatness

134 In the short essay, Deleuze (1992) carves out the difference between spatially bound, disciplinary societies and free-floating, flexible societies of control. He claims that “[i]n the disciplinary societies one was always starting again (from school to the barracks, from the barracks to the factory), while in the societies of control one is never finished with anything—the corporation, the educational system, the armed services being metastable states coexisting in one and the same modulation, like a universal system of deformation” (5). “Control is short-term and of rapid rates of turnover, but also continuous and without limit, while discipline was of long duration, infinite and discontinuous” (6). As far as I understand Deleuze, in societies of control, one is free to move through space but under constant, computer-enhanced control, which registers, limits, and remembers every move.
of control allegory by unifying the act of playing the game with an immediate political experience” (103).

This rather abstract statement may be best understood in the context of the gameplay analysed here. The MGS games confront the player with a rigid system of rules that could be interpreted as similar to the bureaucratic control in contemporary societies. Equipping the player-character with a more flexible, stealthy set of abilities, it suggests that rule-based systems can be challenged covertly. As long as they are not confronted, the enemies do not turn hostile and might best be regarded as ‘requisites,’ strictly following the algorithmic rules. With the help of careful observation, their rigid and predictable routines can be turned against them. In this case, both structural and physical violence are circumvented. Against the background of Arendt’s conceptualization of action, one may say that although the player is not free, his or her limited possibilities of resisting against the structural violence of the opposing rules stems from the fact that, within this computopic world, the system and its sentinels obey the even more rigid rules of Arendt’s tyrannical Nobody.

This motive of resisting against structural violence by a standardizing social system (Arendt) or the society of control (Deleuze, Galloway) can be identified as a central concern of the designer, expressed most explicitly in MGS2 and MGS4. In MGS2, the world is under the control of a mysterious group called the “Patriots” [aikokushatachi], who have long implemented systematic, computer-based control and information censorship over society. In the final showdown, the protagonist and player-character Raven confronts the genetically manipulated Solidas, who threatens society in the attempt to free himself of the grip of these ubiquitous powers and change his genetically pre-designed fate. In MGS4, this motive is repeated. The game portrays a future world dominated by and dependent on a global war economy, sustained by a ubiquitous computer system that controls and monitors all human soldiers and their access to weapons. Private contract armies under the surveillance of the system are waging small-scale wars in many areas of the world. Controlling a rapidly aging Solid Snake, the protagonist known from MGS1, the player tries to avert his genetic brother Liquid’s revolutionary plans to take over the system, thus indirectly supporting the status quo.

This ambivalence of the player-character’s role is amplified by the conspiracy plot of the games, which keep the player in uncertainty over the meaning and status of his or her own actions in the world of MGS (although some kind of heroic
undertone is never abandoned completely). More than once, the player is directly confronted with this uncertainly and asked to reflect on it. Arguably the most direct address can be found in *MGS2*, as **Example 8.2** shows. In the last parts of the game, the entire mission of the protagonist Raven is revealed as an orchestrated “play” [*enshū*] aimed at generating an “extreme situation.” The scenario is explained to be the last test-run for a new training method for the creation of super soldiers. This message has a double meaning, because its content describes the design recipe for all *MGS* titles before and later. If one wants to enjoy the game, one has to play the protagonist’s role to the end [*yakuwari o hatasu*]—an unquestioning obedience, which is commended as a major contribution to the success of the test, and which is a necessary condition for playing the game in the first place.

In this way, the designer confronts the players with their own ‘behaviour’ in a total, rule-based structure and confronts them with the fact that there is no alternative to playing, even in the face of obvious betrayal. Yet, when reflecting his lack of own will in the epilogue, Raiden, whom the designer sets up as a representation of his target audience of masculine videogame players (Noon and Dyer-Witheford 2010, 87) decides to take things in his own hands and find a better way to live than by merely obeying rules, encouraged by nobody else than Snake, the veteran soldier of *MGS1*, who has experienced such powerlessness reduction to an obedient tool himself.

This initial analysis shows that the technologically enhanced difference between player-character abilities and the system offers a limited potential for resistance against a rule-based, rigid system—limited, because the player-character is also part of the overarching computopic universe and bound to its rules. From a similar perspective, Burden and Gouglas (2012, no pn) argue that the game *Portal* can be regarded as “an algorithmic exploration of human struggle against algorithmic processes” that increasingly shape our everyday. They claim that “the procedural nature of games provides a unique opportunity to explore the increasingly procedural nature of such increasingly prevalent technology.” *MGS* can be regarded as a successful example of such exploration. From Arendt’s perspective, this might still amount to no more than a behavioural engagement. However, by highlighting this fact and consciously confronting the player with his or her limitation in the game and in society, the designer turns the rigidity and conformism of the

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computopic space into a reflexive moment geared towards disrupting the player. The games do not stop there. The following sections show that, beyond such elements of critique, MGS points to a more radical perspective on action in its treatment of violence.

8.4 Intrinsic and Physical Violence

In most violent videogames, violence is, first and foremost, a means to win the game. The player is often confronted with an existential enemy in Carl Schmitt’s (1933, 8) sense, who negates the player’s existence and has to be eradicated because he prevents progression in the game. Thus, as Koster (2005, 68) pointedly states, “[m]ost games encourage demonizing the opponent, teaching a sort of ruthlessness that is a proven survival trait.” Among many others, this is the case in Front Mission or EDF, where the player has to occupy the arena or stage totally in order to proceed. In the Front Mission series, enemy pilots have to be killed even if they abandon their wanzers and do not pose a real threat any more. In conventional first-person shooters, enemies can be ignored temporarily, but remain active attackers, at all times in pursuit of the player. As argued above, MGS can be regarded as a partial critique of such unavoidable violence, promoting non-violent solutions during large parts of the games. However, on another level, the range of means in MGS is also deployed to highlight non-instrumental aspects of violence.

While promoting non-violent evasion, the thrill of the covert operations is amplified by the availability of a broad range of ways to deal with a situation. Both with regards to long-term strategy and situation-based tactics, the player can choose between evading the enemy, applying non-lethal force, or disposing of the enemy by lethal means. Depending on the game, the balance between these methods shifts. During large parts of MGS1, lethal force is more or less the only possibility to solve situations where sneaking is not an option, like in the end boss fights. This changes from MGS2 onwards, where even upon enemy encounter, non-lethal force like knocking enemies out or anaesthetizing them is available to the player. As Example 8.1 shows, such action may cause suspicion upon discovery of the unconscious bodies but remains without severe consequences. In contrast, lethal force, if spotted, results in reinforcements and alert status, making it difficult to move for a painfully long period of time. During crucial parts of MGS2, in which the enemies are on guard and report to base frequently, lethal force (or direct
discovery) leads to immediate suspicion and if not covered up successfully, to an almost invincible reinforcement of enemies, making it even more difficult for the player to negotiate through the environment. The game also rewards a non-lethal play-though with the ironic code name “pigeon” (Hamamura 2012, 249).

*MGS3* and *MGS4* most actively promote non-lethal gameplay as a difficult achievement, rewarding successful non-lethal play-through within the limits of several other restrictions not only with a special rank, but also with additional items at the end of each game. At the same time, both games make escaping the enemy in alert phases easier, due to the vastness of the environment and the relative sufficiency of ammunition and weapons. Given the time-consuming and frustrating experience of discovery, it is fair to say that the preference still is on sneaky, non-lethal solutions. However, the overall readjustments to the balance between all three possibilities puts a stronger emphasis on forceful and lethal action, more than before offering a real choice between almost equal alternatives, with advantages changing according to each particular situation.

This tendency towards an equality of means seems to reinstate violence as a central element in the gameplay. As such, it might be said to converge with conventional shooters. The forum-post quoted in footnote 137 points this out,

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136 An online discussion between Malumbrus, NeoSarinatan, and Mr_Big_Boss (2011) about “non-lethal playthrough” on the Metal Gear Solid 2 board of GameFAQs.com suggests that such strategy is at least theoretically possible, although not rewarded. In contrast to the rather limited discussions of non-lethal gameplay in *MGS1* and *MGS2*, there exist numerous forum threads and guides to non-lethal gameplay for *MGS3* and *MGS4* (see for example goldeneye86 2004, Hellicar 2008).

137 This general tendency is also pointed out in a post on the IGN forum by riesenkartoffel (2012) from May 29, 2012 (errors in the original). “I always play MGS games on a hardest available difficulty. I came into to series with MGS3, which I first played at first on easy and I must say I hated the game (I’d punch my younger-self if it would be possible. I didn’t understand anything about stealth and just blasted my way through the game (of course I skipped all cutscenes [sic] and codex sequences). Only problem was that MGS3 wasn’t designed to be a shooter, so I just found it clunky. I put the game on a hold for a while, but somehow got around to it once and decided to give it another chance. I selected Hard for a difficulty and the curve raised so high, that it literally forced me to learn the sneaking mechanics and complex controls. I also desided to pay attention to the story, since by then I had grown and was ready for more complex story. It took a while to get into the controls, but after that I found a whole different game. I just loved it so much, MGS3 stands there as my favourite game even today. But now back to the original message, I choose to play on hardest because it is what really forces you to play these games the way they were meant to be played. People complained that MGS4 could be just blasted through. Yeah, on normal maybe, try that shit on extreme.” As this post points out, there is a huge difference between normal and hard difficulties in all *MGS* games—the latter emphasize tactical skills and stealth maneuvers to a far greater extent. While I am aware of the possible difference in experience this entails, this dimension has to be granted more attention than I can give it in this experimental project. Thus, the analysis refers to my gameplay on normal difficulty.
remarking that “[p]eople complained that MGS4 could be just blasted through.” However, by offering a choice, MGS also adds meaning to violent action beyond its reduction to an instrumental level. By making violence avoidable, the series foregrounds its psychological, intrinsic aspects and the destructive physical effects violence has. In other words, the choice of means creates an awareness of the content of these means, confronting the player with the fact that any action taken is, at least in part, not only behavioural but—within the limits of the computopic—also either deliberate and intrinsic, or a result of a lack of control (skills) and power on the part of the player.

In overwhelming, confusing situations, which escape the player’s control, reverting to lethal violence and its lasting, predictable effects is a tempting option—a fact that reminds us of Arendt’s dictum that a loss of power makes us revert to violent means. However, the existence of other ways foregrounds the violent acts committed as the player’s choice. Miller (2006) supports this impression in her analysis of MGS. Observing the gradual shift in balance and the opening of the game towards more “meaningful” or “real choices” from MGS1 to MGS3, she claims that Kojima is able to communicate his critique of violence particularly well because MGS3 managed to use the elements of player choice to set the medium of a videogame apart from, say, books and movies. In a sense, Kojima gave you a portion of the game entirely, and somewhat perversely, player-created— that is, a product of nothing more than the player’s earlier choices— and derived a meaningful message from it. […] Books and movies, as passive media, relate a message to the reader by presenting a story where the reader sees the consequences of the protagonist’s decisions and interprets from there. Videogames, as MGS3 would have us understand, can be aimed directly at the player. Such reflexivity is further amplified by the fact that often, violent solutions to overwhelming situations lead to discovery and, as a result, extended periods of inactivity on the part of the player—here, the designer almost appears to mock the player for resorting to violence.138 In other cases, most notably the boss fights, non-lethal solutions are by far more difficult to achieve than lethal disposal.

In MGS4, this tension reaches a maximal level. In the boss fights against the

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138 Making violence inefficient and “waiting” a central motive of a videogame in our accelerated times may, in itself, be interpreted as a strong political statement.
four members of the “Beauty and Beast unit,” the player confronts psychologically distorted, technologically enhanced, existential enemies. As Example 8.3 shows, victory over a technologically enhanced “Beast” is followed by an encounter with the respective “Beauty,” who—although defeated—still attacks Snake bare-handed. Although these scenes are also examples of the designer’s erotic fantasies present in all titles—in this case, holding up the camera at specific moments makes the Beauty pose for the player—the Beauty’s embrace remains deadly, putting the player into the position of running away from a weakened enemy who deserves pity more than hostility. Here, the use of force is instrumentally logical, but at the same time deeply disturbing.

But whereas violence as a last resort in lack of other options can still be explained instrumentally, there is also a dimension of videogame violence as entertainment in the games. At times, one just pulls the trigger instead of crawling past. Especially the later titles do not restrict violent action through game mechanics and always carry a certain admiration for weapons and war with them—the broad arsenal of deadly firearms available and the general setup of the protagonist as a one-man army attest to this. This intrinsic quality of violence is not comparable to the kind of intrinsic violence Fanon and Sartre describe. The player is never physically oppressed or abused. Likewise, violent action does not cause physical consequences outside of the computopic universe and its virtual, detached Otherness. In other words, such violence has a different quality than structural or physical violence in the everyday, and, even if executed for the sake of carnage and destruction, remains playful and entertaining. This does, however, not erase its cognitive and

139 English subtitles for MGS4 taken from SamuraiX’s (2008) Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots - Game Script.

140 Despite their functional dimension, moral choices in games frequently invite commentary by scholars, critics, and gamers. Tavinor (2009, 130), for example, discusses the experience of moral choices in Bioshock from 2007, in which the player may or may not kill defenceless characters called Little Sisters. In 2009, Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 has generated worldwide discussions amongst gamers and in mass media, because one of the stages enables the player to kill innocent civilians as a covert operative in an airport taken control of by a terrorist group.

141 I am aware that this is a controversial phrasing in the context of a discourse on violent videogames and their effects. As mentioned before, this is not the place to engage with the complexities of this discourse and its numerous, often contradictory studies. What meaning or function this violence has in the context of the individual player’s everyday cannot be answered here. Instead, this use of “playful” is, first and foremost intended as a qualification of the action within the computopic universe, foregrounding its difference from physical or structural violence in the everyday—a difference I believe the players to be aware of to the same extent they are aware of it in other media.
psychological meaning, and it is this dual structure that the designer, once again, deploys in his ambivalent engagement with playful violence, both on the level of player choice and in various commentaries on violence.

Example 8.3 also showed that the four Beauty and Beast bosses of MGS4 are victims of psychological damage inflicted in war and violent conflicts. In Example 8.4 I have compiled several instances, in which the games comment on the player's violence. During the fight with The Sorrow in MGS3, the player has to lead the protagonist through a river, in which the dead bodies he or she has produced so far in the game float past, screaming in agony. Here and elsewhere, commentary on violence and violent action not only target the instrumental, necessary aspect, but also a more affective, intrinsic, playful dimension. Thereby, it emphasizes the stark contrast between the terrifying physical and psychological effects of the violence depicted and described in the game, and the player's playful acts of violence. In MGS2, protagonist Raiden asks Snake if he ever enjoyed the killing. Snake's forceful denial only amplifies the disruption on the part of the player, who is aware of the dual nature of his or her own action, at the same time playful and violent.

The designer's creativity in addressing the player in this ambivalent, dual way is an important aspect of MGS. While offering a broad arsenal of deadly weapons and combat actions, the designer infuses the games with comments on violence, which are intended to disrupt the player. The protagonist of MGS2, Raiden, is mocked by Snake for his virtual experience of war and criticized for his seeming fascination for violence and killing—later, the player finds out that Raiden was a child soldier and a merciless killing machine in the past. Often, this commentary addresses the player directly, as in the end of MGS1, where Liquid accuses him of having enjoyed the killing throughout the game.

For the player, it is hard to deny this, since violence in MGS is, to a great extent, frivolous entertainment. This may be said for most videogames. However, most games do not discuss this status actively or locate this discussion entirely on the instrumental level, like I have shown in the case of front mission 3, where violence is justified by the situation and the need to proceed in the game (see chapter 5, p. 84). When combined with the variety of means available in MGS, the critical comments on violence in these games gain a disruptive force, confronting the player with the ambivalence of his and her actions. It is important to understand

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that the games nonetheless allow such violence and risk that their commentary is ignored. However, this might be the only way to turn playful violence into an element of a disruptive conflict.

Although far from offering simple answers to the problem of violence, *MGS* illustrates the physical and psychological effects of violence and questions it. This is possible because the series deploys technological enhancements to create a broad range of action possibilities beyond instrumental violence, where most games merely enhance the player’s capacity to violent acts and unquestioned carnage. This level of reflexivity is significant because it opens a perspective on violence not limited to its instrumental character, but at the same time neither idealizing nor rejecting its intrinsic dimension. Where Arendt largely ignores this intrinsic dimension of violence in her focus on its “instrumental” aspect (see Roberts 2004, 145), *MGS* makes it a central focus of critique. Importantly, this critique depends on the possibility of playful violence and can, in this sense, only be explored in this way because the virtual and voluntary computopic space offers the active experience of violence without consequences in our empirical reality. Yet, like the treatment of instrumental violence analysed in the last section, it remains on the level of critical reflection. In the following section I examine the ways in *MGS* goes beyond such critique, potentially prompting the player to novel action.

### 8.5 Violent Action

In several moments during the games, the difference between systematic and player-character abilities is turned upside down both sensually and with respect to action. For example, the fights in *MGS3* are characterized by a seeming reversal of ability—but the player can rely on the invisibility, the long-range sensorium of the player-character, and his sophisticated close combat techniques, opponents like The Fear, The End, or The Boss are hard to beat precisely because they appear superior in these categories. Sensually, the player is deprived of his or her usual advantage over the enemy, confronted with (seemingly) invisible enemies who surpass his or her senses. The tension between seeing and being seen is most effectively reversed in the last fight against The Boss, where the usual “crawling” causes complete blindness, as the fight commences in a field of flowers.

In other instances, endless repetition prompts the player to question the possibility to proceed in the game. For example, in *MGS1*, the protagonist is
captured and repeatedly tortured by Ocelot, not certain how and when to escape this threat, which is repeated until the player cannot keep up with the increasing speed of button-mashing required to survive the torture any more. In *MGS2*, boss fights with opponents like the RAYs, or a painfully long period of time during which the (naked) player is seemingly trapped in a room with all doors locked, cause anxiety and extreme insecurity, because these situations lack a (conceivable) end. While most of the above-mentioned situations maintain a link with the knowledge and skills obtained in regular gameplay, the games also manage to enter an uncontrollable sphere beyond common sense in other instances, as **Example 8.5** shows. The fight against The Sorrow can only be won by accessing the items menu after the protagonist’s death, and reviving him with the “revival pill.” Against Psycho-Mantis in *MGS1*, who directly reacts to controller input, only switching controller ports has an effect, and the victory over his reincarnation in *MGS4* likewise depends on methods that are far from self-explanatory.

As the example shows, the fight against Psycho-Mantis also contains some of the most significant demonstrations of sensual deprivation in the series. Mantis is not only invisible and steals the player’s eyes (activating first person mode allows the player to experience the perspective of Psycho Mantis, which becomes the only way to spot the enemy in the second half of the fight), but also has the ability to generate what at first glance looks like the black “video” screen familiar to videogame players in the 1990s.143 *MGS2* offers several additional visual exceptions, in which the designer demonstrates his dominance over the game world and its rules. During an action-intense sequence towards the end of the game, the screen is suddenly scaled-down in a fashion familiar from moments of “game over,” accompanied by the respective sound. For an instance, this event may successfully trick the player into believing that the protagonist has died from enemy fire. However, a closer look reveals that the usual “Mission Failed” statement reads “Fission Mailed,” and that Raiden is still alive, now only visible in miniature but nonetheless controlled by the player. Noon and Dyer-Witheford (2010, 87) regard this example as an instance of Brechtian “estrangement” and a break through the fourth wall that furthers self-reflexivity. However, one can also regard these moments as demonstrations of the

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143 This screen appeared when a gaming console or other peripheral were switched off or had lost the signal from the console, which was usually attached to the video-in port of the television screen. In *MGS1*, the message reads “Hideo” instead of “video.” Whereas this appears significantly different in English, the difference in Japanese is harder to spot, consisting only in the omission of two small dots (dakuten) over the first character, due to which ビデオ (video) becomesヒデオ (Hideo).
designer’s superiority over the computopic universe of MGS, which confronts the player with the fact that the rules are man-made and can change at any time.

What these examples have in common is that they confront the player with extreme situations in which common sense, knowledge, and prior experience fail. Both the overpowering enemies in the boss fights, during which the hunter becomes the prey, and the moments in which the rules seemingly change, replace the usual feeling of mastery with anxiety, psychological thrill, and pressure. Based on the work of Giorgio Agamben, I propose to understand these situations as computopic “states of exception” invoked by the designer.\textsuperscript{144} Agamben (2005, 50) defines the state of exception as “a space devoid of law, a zone of anomie in which all legal determinations—and above all the very distinction between public and private—are deactivated.” As such, the state of exception becomes an increasingly common political practice in modernity, which blurs the boundaries between exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, \textit{zōē} [bare life] and \textit{bios} [qualified life] (Agamben 2002, 19).

The state of exception is marked by ambiguity and an undecidability, in which \textit{factum} (life) and \textit{ius} (norm) fade into each other (Agamben 2005, 29). This blurring has decisive effects on the character of action within its boundaries. The state of exception “defines a ‘state of the law’ in which, on the one hand, the norm is in force \textit{vige} but is not applied (it has no ‘force’ \textit{forza}) and, on the other hand, acts that do not have the value \textit{valore} of law acquire its ‘force’” (38). This problem of the status of action in the state of exception is explained in more detail in the context of the \textit{iustitium}\textsuperscript{145}, which, for Agamben, is the archetype of the state of exception.

The crucial problem connected to the suspension of the law is that of the acts committed during the \textit{iustitium}, the nature of which seems to escape all legal definition. Because neither transgressive, executive, nor legislative, they seem to be situated in an absolute non-place with respect to the law. […] The idea of a force-of-law is a response to this

\textsuperscript{144} Despite his influence, Agamben remains a controversial thinker, both with regards to his theory, and with regards to his polemic writing, which polarizes at times without intrinsic necessity (Geulen 2005, 118). However, the aim of this chapter is not to add to the large existing body of works about the philosopher. Despite his problematic claims, the emphasis on ambiguity in the state of exception is useful for describing the blurring of rules and the non-centered status (Derrida, see chapter 3, p. 43) of the experience.

\textsuperscript{145} According to Agamben (2005, 41), the term literally means ”stillstand” or “suspension of the law.”
undefinability and this non-place. [...] Force of law that is separate from the law, floating *imperium*, being in force [*vigenza*] without application, and, more generally, the idea of a sort of “degree zero” of the law—all these are fictions through which law attempts to encompass its own absence and to appropriate the state of exception, or at least to assure itself a relation with it. (51)

In simple terms, the state of exception is radical because it abolishes any rules that pre-structure action in the regular, normal situation. Here, action loses its directionality and becomes a force in the absence of any evaluative criteria or laws. For Agamben, any attempt to describe the state of exception in relation to the law is a fictive way in which the law and its proponents attempt to secure its superiority over the exception. The examples mentioned above show that *MGS* confronts the player with such state of exception, in which known rules are abandoned and the norm cannot be applied. While it would be too far-fetched to call the designer-sovereign’s control over the computopic in this specific case a fiction, it is nonetheless surprising how many structural similarities the extreme situations in *MGS* described above share with Agamben’s account. They all depart from common rules and earlier experience in some sense and create situations in which neither acquired skills nor logical deduction guarantee success. In this, they show the arbitrariness of the computopic universe and reveal the sovereign’s control over it, conveying the impression that anything is possible within its realm. The player has to find ways out of these exceptional situations, which sometimes proves very difficult and physically intense. For example, depending on the player’s skills, the sharp-shooting showdown against The End in *MGS3* might bind the highly alert player to the screen for more than one hour.

This does not mean that the computopic state of exception in *MGS* is divorced from the regular rules entirely. Moreover, the player still requires considerable skills—attained during regular gameplay—to prevail. However, even this relation to the regular experience is reversed. For example, the chances of success in the encounters with Solidas (*MGS2*) or The Boss (*MGS3*) are much higher if the player ignores the reflex of keeping his or her distance to the opponent, and counters attacks rather than carrying them out.147 Other situations, such as the fight against

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146 In the English edition, the term “force-of-law” is expressed by crossing out the word law. For convenience reasons, I have used single strike-through.

147 These situations highlight the active quality the seemingly passive gameplay (sneaking, avoiding contact, camouflage) has: prompting the right attack from the opponent by
The Sorrow or Psycho-Mantis are less straightforward. My own attempts often oscillated between extreme frustration and liberated arbitrariness, frequently ending in laughter: where nothing is certain, anything—even the most illogical acts—may have equal chances of success.

In this sense, the states of exception function as a kind of non-place (Agamben) or a utopic enclave (see Jameson in chapter 2, p. 19) within the computopic Otherness, forcing the player to adapt to new situations, observe the opponent carefully despite the extreme pressure and intimidation, and think and experiment with the environment repeatedly and beyond conventional knowledge of the game (system)—provided he or she does not give up and seek help in walkthroughs and guidebooks. Rather frequently, this tricks the player into attempting all kinds of absurd actions, which one would normally know to be out of the question. At the cost of uncountable continues, the player is invited to abandon any sense of systematic rules and do the seemingly impossible, illogical, and irresponsible. Against the state of exception and its structural violence, repetition and death become the only valid currency, and experimental action and playful violence the only means likely to yield any effect. Here, the boundary between intrinsic playfulness and instrumental violence becomes blurred. Again, this playfulness is only possible due to the broad range of possible actions within the contingent computopic universes of MGS, which allow the player to experience multiple versions.

8.6 Conclusions
In this chapter, I have examined the disruptive potential of rules and action in the computopic space, focusing on the controversial dimension of violence in Metal Gear Solid. A brief overview of some existing currents in the discourse on violence has helped to identify some of the major dimensions of the concept and pointed to several questions that emerge with respect to the status and significance of violence in videogames. The subsequent analysis focused on several ways in which violence is deployed critically and reconfigured playfully in the MGS series.

In the first analytic section, I showed how the rigidity of systematic violence is set
up against a more flexible player, affording tactics of resistance against the system. In contrast to other games, *MGS* included and often promoted non-violent evasion based on observation and an understanding of the systematic algorithms, rather than violent, open conflict. In this, the series offers an intriguing combination of time and space in the context of my earlier emphasis on acceleration and speed. Paul Virilio (2006, 149-152) claims that the negation of space due to the development of means for instantaneous action at a distance leads to the possibility of a “direct encounter of every surface on the globe.” *MGS* instead offers a spatial visualization of the blind spots every complex system has due to its rigid rules, and proposes to use the advantage of agility and technology to identify and exploit them, often in a time-consuming fashion. Although these strategies remain behavioural, to speak with Arendt, because they rely on the rules of engagement, the designer offers a disruptive experience in those moments where he exploits this limitation in a critique of obedience in contemporary society.

In the second section, I examined the relation between instrumental and intrinsic action, arguing that the equal choice between non-violent and violent means is necessary to make the dimension of intrinsic violence available to critique. Deliberately contrasting the player’s playful, voluntary, and intentional acts of violence in the virtual computopic space of *MGS* with references to the physical and psychological terrors of war, the designer confronts the player with a disruptive conflict between his or her own actions and their meaning. This direct addressing of the intrinsic dimension of violence in action is only possible due to the virtual, voluntary character of the computopic space and the separation between the cognitive meaning of an action and its physical effects that dominates it. In this sense, the computopic space allows for a serious treatment of playful violence, prompting us to think about our own position to violence in games and outside them, beyond instrumental justifications. In the third section, I showed that *MGS* confronts the player with computopic states of exception. In these unpredictable enclaves within the games’ rule-based space, conventional rules are abandoned. This results in an exceptional space for experimental action. In lack of guiding principles, these situations blur the boundaries between intrinsic and instrumental action, turning playful violence into one possible choice among others. Importantly, this enclave is not detached from the computopic universe, but depends on it and maintains a link to it—if only in the sense that the player knows that there is a solution, that the game can be won.
Just as important, it seems to me, is the fact that this openness and variability of means not only challenges the player to experiment with the system at all times, but also generates an environment in which very different skill sets on the part of the player may be equally successful. In a strange way, then, the openness of the system that affords violent acts generates a condition of equality in diversity, regarded as crucial for political action by Arendt. As mentioned, Arendt (1998, 190-192) regards political action as novel, “boundless” and “inherently unpredictable.” Particularly the first of these categories is explicitly narrowly defined. “The new always happens against the overwhelming odds of statistical laws and their probability, which for all practical, everyday purposes amounts to certainty; the new therefore always appears in the guise of a miracle. The fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable” (Arendt 1998, 178).

The playful explorations of the state of exception in MGS do not offer such novelty, because the player cannot transgress the actions that were all along available to him or her in the computopic universe. However, if compared to the conventional gameplay, I believe these instances nevertheless stimulate novel action in the sense of creative reconfigurations and combinations of existing strategies, the outcome of which cannot be predicted. Thereby, the games manage to convey a kind of boundlessness of the system and the player. Within these limits, I argue that MGS in fact succeeds in offering a non-place, in which, just as Arendt predicts in the introductory quote of this chapter, a radically different life under man-made conditions offers what the human condition bound to our earth could not allow: playful violence as a kind of action in Arendt’s sense of the word.