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9 Conclusion

Can we imagine a society or world radically different from ours? This was the question I posed at the beginning of this dissertation, and with which I turned to Japanese sf videogames. Arguing that the radical political imagination necessary today can be stimulated by disruptive conflicts, I located the theoretical potentials of videogame expression, or what I identified as the computopic space, in its contingent, partly unimagined, action-based, expressively combinatory and detached character. In order to deal with the challenges of this theoretical framing, I developed a flexible methodology, which emphasizes flexibility and repeated playful invasion as the preferable mode of engagement. Crucially, this included drawing on “non-academic” information and exploring alternative channels for presenting the results of the analysis. With the help of these additional sources and the viable video examples, which proved an important complement to the textual analysis, I showed that Japanese sf videogames can present us with disruptive conflicts that stimulate our radical political imagination.

The analysis shows that videogames can deploy their expressive means in innovative engagements with science fictional tropes like robots, time travel, the alien, or war technology and violence. Whether in the shape of the dystopic mecha-dominated futures of chapter 5, or in the more constructive engagements with time, aesthetic novelty, and political action discussed in part III, the multifarious combinations of narratives, representations, rules, and action offer rich playing fields for critical commentaries on the status quo, and confront the player with disruptive conflicts capable of stimulating radical imagination in central areas of political philosophy. I showed that Shadow of Memories is capable of disrupting our common sense of linear time, which is dominant contemporary society and capitalist economy, thus pointing towards alternative temporalities. Games like The Earth Defense Force, Rez, and Shinseiki Evangelion 2 confront us with uncanny, unintelligible aesthetic aliens and broaden our perception of what is in common, and what serves as the basis of our political community. The Metal Gear Solid games confront us with exceptional situations and offer us a virtual environment for experimenting with novel actions beyond behaviour. In all cases, the conflicts disrupt different pillars of the status quo, which shape the contemporary possibilities of political imagination and political action.

The active, contingent, and partly unimagined computopic spaces videogames
offer, show that Virilio’s initial pessimism about the loss of imagination due to
the pre-defined game space referred to in the introduction is not justified. On the
contrary, the examples show that, despite its pre-structured, rule-based nature, the
computopic space can deploy their multifarious expressive elements dynamically
to confront us with issues or problems we can experiment with. In this, they
allow for playful engagements that Virilio would welcome. In the aforementioned
interview with Sans, he demands of us to “[p]lay at being a critic. Deconstruct the
game in order to play with it. Instead of accepting the rules, challenge and modify
them. Without the freedom to critique and reconstruct, there is no truly free

game: we are addicts and nothing more” (1999). Games facilitate these playfully
critical engagements with their structure and content. In sum, they offer rich, non-
predetermined, partly unimagined spaces for active and innovative engagements
with radical political ideas and stimulate our political imagination of alternatives.
In this, I believe that they can reach beyond what Arendt (1998, 168-169) calls
“tangible” or “dead” works of art.

The analysis shows that the most radical and most effective moments of
disruption emerge where computopic universes offer an internal tension and set up
an enclave within their Otherness; one that stands in contrast to it. In the analysis of
time, this was the case in the systematic negation of the already confused narrative
and its goal of survival. In the analysis of alien aesthetics, it was generated in the
experience of a radical negation of intention and game goals in the playful spaces
of Rez and Eva2. In the discussion of violent technology, it was identified as a state
of exception that negates the conventional gameplay and confronts the player
with situations in which unpredictable solutions have to be found playfully. In all
these cases, the computopic space revealed its potential to approach ideal play, at
the same time showing and sometimes deliberately playing with the limits of this
approach. None of the enclaves would be as effective as they are if they weren’t set
up against a reverse current of the games.

These tensions prompt an unexpected answer to the question, whether
Otherness is possible in videogames—a question I have identified as crucial
problem in the theoretical exploration. Given the limits of our imagination (which
is grounded in our knowledge), our perception (which is based on our senses) and
our action (which requires direction), I remained sceptical about such Otherness
throughout the project. Despite this sceptical attitude, the analysis shows that
computopic Otherness is in fact possible, but dependent on the extent to which
games can create an experiential tension within their computopic universes. The abovementioned examples of negated narratives, aimless free play or frivolous experiments with violence in situations that escape common sense and knowledge offer such instances of radical Otherness. Strikingly, all these instances involve a distinct, somehow distorted treatment of death: in SoM and MGS, the player negates or deploys it actively, whereas in Eva2 and Rez the game world abandons the threat to life entirely. That death takes on a very different quality in videogames is hardly surprising. However, I did not expect it thus closely related to ideal play.

This relation between Otherness, play, and death is not the only promising field for future research that emerged in the course of this exploration. The limited number of games covered in the analysis calls for a broadening of the scope in terms of titles, genres, and regional constraints. Sf has proven a fruitful starting point to test the theory and methodology, and remains a rich field for plausible experiences of Otherness. Yet, given the discrepancies in genre treatment between literature and videogames, which are more readily categorized into shooters, adventures, and role-playing games, I wonder if the computopic could serve as a framework for more expansive explorations beyond genre-boundaries. In addition to broadening the scope, I hope to be able to pay more attention to the ways in which disruptive conflicts are experienced among players. Apart from a more extensive engagement with online sources, this could involve qualitative research with gamers in Europe or Japan. In the future, I hope to adapt the framework to multiplayer games and pay more attention to disruption that arises from acting in virtual communities. I believe that accepting the challenge of significant adjustments to theory and methodology, might be rewarded with an entirely different set of disruptive experiences and alternatives to the status quo.

Technically and philosophically, all these steps could be paralleled with a more intensive engagement with several of the issues the thesis raised but could not attend to. This concerns for example the role of the computer as performer in general and the idea of artificial intelligence in particular. This leads back to the earlier discussion of intentionality on the part of the designer, and the possibility and status of intentionality in contemporary media in general—particularly in times when media work and media culture is considered to be increasingly 'playful.' Furthermore, I wonder if Henri Bergson's understanding of matter, action, time, and memory—four terms that appeared at several points during this thesis—might
not have more to contribute to a theory of the computopic space and videogame play than my initial brief excursus to his work could discover. However, a further engagement with Bergson might involve a more direct reference to contemporary cognitive science.

A third, slightly different field of interest emerged more clearly from the engagement with games and the perspective I adopted in this thesis. My exploration shows that games can be an expressive medium exploring, or presenting open, contingent ideas. The fact that the video examples succeed in complementing the written analysis, even if they do not succeed in conveying the gameplay experience first-hand, makes me wonder if videogames could not become a more active part of philosophical and political thought experiments, beyond what serious and persuasive games already achieve today. This thesis shows that games can offer disruptive open-ended ideational and experiential playgrounds. I believe it is time to explore them more actively as such.

In sum, I hope to have shown that academically grounded inquiries into videogame content from a political philosophy perspective are important and rewarding. Videogames are a rich medium of experience and offer vast possibilities for critical, disruptive expression worth further active exploration by designers, players, and scholars. The theoretical, methodical, and practical impulses and categories developed here can hopefully serve as a first step.