Disruptive Conflicts in Computopic Space

Roth, M.E.

4 SF as Starting Point

> [T]he science fiction narrative […] demonstrates the incompatibilities existing between our presence in the world and the various levels of a certain anesthesia in our consciousness that, at every moment, inclines us to see-saw into more or less extensive absences, more or less serious, even to provoke by various means instantaneous immersions in other worlds, parallel worlds, interstitial, bifurcating, right up to that *black hole*, which would be only an excess of speed in these kinds of crossings, a pure phenomenon of speed, abrogating the initial separation between day and night. (Virilio 2009, 85)

In part I, I established the theoretical framework around the notion of the computopic and presented a methodological approach to deal with the various challenges this framework presents. What is missing from these elaborations is a sense for the material basis for this project. This is the task set for part II. As a first step, the following chapter aims to define the scope of titles for the analysis, discussing and applying various selection criteria to the market of Japanese videogames. Given the explorative character of this study, I argue that the genre of sf, which makes novelty its central aim without losing touch with our empirical reality, can be a helpful guide in the initial search for stimulating examples. As mentioned, this project is based on two presuppositions. Firstly, I focus on Japan as a particularly dense, vivid, and globally successful market and geographical field for videogame development and consumption. Secondly, I limit the analysis to single-player games and modes, in order to reduce complexity in an already complex field. Other restrictions and limitations will be referred to where adequate.

4.1 Science Fiction as a Field

In the first chapter, I have developed a perspective on videogames as a space of Otherness termed the computopic. For inspiration, I drew on literary theory and the study of science fiction and utopia, because these genres share the enclavic character of play and games. However, if, as I have claimed, the computopic is always already a space of Otherness, the question is whether the content of a computopic universe has an influence on its potential to host disruptive conflicts.

Adorno's emphasis on *Phantasie* suggests that any cultural product or work of art can potentially stimulate our autonomous thought. However, to follow this suggestion would go far beyond the boundaries of this project. Jameson's analysis provides a narrower perspective, because he links disruption to the content of science fiction and utopia as much as to its form. The underlying assumption shared by many science fiction authors is that sf derives its critical momentum from its status as scientific fiction and the link this status creates to the empirical reality of its readers. I adopt this assumption in my analysis for two reasons: Firstly, it provides a way of limiting the initial exploration to a more or less consistent, contained field. Secondly, while not granting sf any exclusive rights on disruption, I do believe that this genre, in the way in which I define it, offers the most readily available and immediately relevant conflicts.

Tracing this critical immediacy to its sources, the following sections offer a stronger basis for the preference on science fiction and at the same time qualify the sense in which I deploy sf in the selection of examples. While drawing on various attempts to define the genre, I do not intend to add another definition. Rather, the following discussion of some major characteristics of sf serves as a rough, flexible guideline for the consecutive approximation to the field of Japanese videogames.

4.2 Plausibility

Comparing SF to critical theory, Carl Freedman (1987, 188) argues that both deploy critique "in order to clear space upon which positive alternatives to the existent can be constructed." The question, why this tendency is particularly strong in science fictional literature, is not easy to answer, because theorists characterize sf variously. As Chris Goto-Jones (2010, 22) observes, "SF is […] a difficult terrain, and its dimensions are continuously contested. It exists in a condition of peril within broader realms of literature." I have already mentioned Suvin's influential definition of sf as the genre of cognitive estrangement based on the novum (see chapter 2, p. 10) In contrast, recent definitions of the genre appear rather vague. Adam Roberts (2006, 148), for example, concludes his analysis as follows:

> Here is exactly where we find science fiction, at the point a stick turns into a horse. It might be said that all literature, or all art, does this; but I think that SF is much more playful (in this profound sense) than other literature. It is predicated upon a fundamental *hospitality to otherness*,

> to the alien, where other aspects of culture compromise. SF is a metaphorical discourse in a particular sense, the cognitive, imaginative, affective, creative sense that Ricoeur opens up. Its metaphor is aesthetic, which is to say poetic and speculative.

Against Suvin's emphasis on cognitive estrangement, Gregory Renault (1980, 116) points out that all fiction has estranging capacities. Thomas Pavel (1986, 62) gives reason for a similar objection when he states that, in general, "[w]orks of fiction more or less dramatically combine incompatible world-structures, play with the impossible, and incessantly speak about the unspeakable." Yet, there seems to be a difference in the source and quality of the estrangement between sf and other genres. According to Suvin (1979, 7), "SF is as fully opposed to supernatural or metaphysical estrangement as it is to naturalism or empiricism."

It might be helpful to examine this position between the supernatural and the natural in more detail. Renault (1980, 130) argues that Suvin's attempt to isolate SF from the latter is flawed because it is based on a simplification:

> Most significant in Suvin's discussion of fantasy and SF is his implied distinction between empirically possible and impossible Others, ideal possibility versus ideal impossibility, a distinction corresponding to that between scientific and utopian socialism in the Marxist tradition. Unfortunately, Suvin's use of this important distinction suffers from a confusion regarding elements of figural and literal discourse. Because they are non-empirical, imaginative constructs, all literary devices, as figural signifiers, have the same ontological status as lies. By attempting to base the "cognitive" validity of SF and fantasy upon the possibility/impossibility of the devices or elements utilized in a particular literary strategy, Suvin confuses the function of the referent in literal experience with that of the literary element in fictive signification. As many critics point out, SF's fidelity to science consists of merely "maintaining the illusion of plausibility," a function of the larger task of literary realism.

Interestingly, Suvin himself is rather vague about the status of possibility, suggesting that the quality of sf does not necessarily depend on its scientific rigor. This has to do with the position of the science fictional novum, or, "the point at which the SF text distils the difference between its imagined world and the world which we all inhabit" (Roberts 2006, 17). For Suvin (1979, 64-65), "[t]he novum is postulated on and validated by the post-Cartesian and post-Baconian scientific *method*. This

does not mean that the novelty is primarily a matter of scientific facts or even hypotheses." Here, Suvin puts the emphasis on the scientific scrutiny of author and reader, whereas the novum itself may originate in non-scientific imagination.

More explicitly, Japanese writer Abe Kōbō (2002, 343-344) argues that SF is grounded in a "Vitality of Pseudo-Science," and that "it is a separation from science that can open new vistas and new possibilities for science fiction." Like Suvin, Abe suggests that the estrangement in literature is not so much based on scientific fictions, but rather on the scientific method of sketching out the consequences of a postulated hypothesis (or novum). "In literature, proximity to discovered facts is far less important than adherence to the internal laws of discovery itself. In other words, it's a question of forming a hypothesis and then seeing to what extent you can erect a new system of rules, utterly different from the existing rules of our everyday lives" (346).

This brief discussion suggests that the 'possibility' and validity of sf, as opposed to the 'impossibility' of fantasy, does not hinge on a strict sense of science. Discussing the problem of possibility in *Fictional Worlds*, Pavel (1986, 46-47) argues that a narrow understanding of possible fictional worlds as only those worlds which share all members with the real world is impractical. In most cases, the relation between a fictional world and an underlying world A, for example the empirical world, cannot be verified, because most fictional worlds are abstractions and as such do not represent all their members or laws. To circumvent this problem, he suggests that one regards the vague relation of possibility as a function of the reader's "aesthetic intuition." Granting the "really real world" ontological priority over fictional worlds, Pavel proposes to understand fictional worlds as secondary universes in relation to our empirical reality as the primary universe (57). This dual structure, he argues, can further be categorized into isomorphic or "existentially conservative" and non-isomorphic or "existentially creative" relations. The latter contain elements that lack a correspondent in the primary universe and are therefore referred to as "salient structures."

This model entails a more nuanced understanding of the ontology of possible fiction than both Suvin and Renault apply, and reveals the inherent contradiction of the genre of sf, which might be said to be the source of its vitality: if the well-accepted concept of the novum dominates a fictional world, a given sf world can only be a secondary universe in a salient structure. At the same time, sf maintains a link of possibility—cognitive validation (Suvin) or aesthetic intuition (Pavel)—

to our empirical reality. Freedman (1987, 186-187) elaborates this notion of possibility in his analysis of the similarity between sf and critical theory, arguing that this similarity is a matter of

> shared perspectives […], of the dialectic standpoint of the SF tendency, with its insistence upon historical mutability, material reducibility, and, at least implicitly, Utopian possibility. In a sense, SF is of all genres the one most devoted to historical specificity: for the SF world is not only one different in time or place from our own, but one whose chief interest is precisely the difference that such difference makes, and, in addition, one whose difference is nonetheless contained within a cognitive continuum with the actual (thus sharply distinguishing SF from the irrationalist estrangements of fantasy or Gothic literature, which secretly work to ratify the mundane status quo by presenting no alternative to the latter other than inexplicable discontinuities).

Whether we want to embrace Freedman's terms or not, his characterization of sf suggests that the "aesthetic intuition" about its possibility is grounded in a sense of continuity with our empirical reality. In this sense, sf targets an intuition about the possibility of imagining or even realizing the alternative it presents, rather than the correctness of its scientific assumptions. Well-known sf and fantasy author Orson Scott Card (2001) promotes a similar understanding. He insists on a shared epistemological framework of all speculative fiction, which "by definition is geared toward an audience that wants strangeness, an audience that wants to spend time in worlds that absolutely are *not* like the observable world around them" (20), claiming that both "science fiction and fantasy stories are those that take place in worlds that have never existed or are not yet known" (18). Yet, Scott Card distinguishes between the two, claiming that "science fiction is about what *could* be but isn't; fantasy is about what *couldn't* be" (22).

The above discussion suggests that sf can be characterized as a genre of not-yet existent but possible worlds. Importantly, this judgment is, as Scott Card emphasizes, made by the reader. Suvin's reference to "cognitive validation" suggests a similar understanding.[44] In this sense, the possible not-yet does not deny the

44 Renault (1980, 130) criticizes Suvin for his lack of interest in the reader, pointing out that "[t]he tension in SF literary discourse between is and ought, same and other which generates a perception of/desire for new possibilities in the old, is certainly formally embodied in the work, but it also must be sparked in the socially and historically-located reader. By not treating cognitive estrangement as part of the cultural reception dialectic, Suvin is forced to isolate his genre from other forms of the Fantastic." While making an important point,

importance of the reader's subjectivity—and, one may add, his or her cultural background and ideological or religious beliefs. However, it does entail a sense of continuity with our empirical reality. In order to bring both factors together and to avoid confusion with other notions like possibility or the scientific, I suggest calling this relation **plausibility**. While sharing the commitment to Otherness with fantasy, the latter threatens any intuitive plausibility because it is "existentially creative" beyond the technically possible. Sf, on the other hand, can be regarded as a deliberate attempt at balancing possibility and Otherness—conservative and creative elements—in such a way as to afford its fictional alternative immediate social and political relevance.[45] This direct, explicit addressing of the reader makes sf a particularly promising starting point for an analysis of the political potentials computopic space affords.

4.3 Tendency and Banality

I would like to make two additions to this characterization of sf in the context of videogames. The first concerns the relation between possibility and impossibility. Pavel (1986, 49) regards worlds as impossible, if "[t]he presence of contradictions effectively prevents us from considering fictional worlds as genuine possible worlds." Such logical or technical contradictions are based on a primary world A, which serves as standard of comparison (48). In the case of sf, this evaluation is based on our empirical reality. In the context of videogames, however, the notion of contradictions is problematic, because in most cases, their Otherness is experienced as contradictory at some level.

Renault seems to simplify Suvin's discourse. True, Suvin does not focus on the reader directly. In this sense, the centrality of the author and his scarce references to the necessity of validating the novum's work cognitively may be regarded as neglect. However, it seems crucial to point out that his conversion of "science fiction" into "cognitive estrangement," like the notion of "disruption" applied by Jameson, can be read as a decisive step away from a formal definition of the genre, towards a conceptualization of its political possibilities in consumption and thus for the reader—who else could be estranged.

45 Where Frederic Jameson refers to sf's necessary failure to invent the absolute Other, he seems to address not only the limitations of human imagination, but also the genre of sf and its critical potential itself, in the sense that an absolute Other would risk to fail stimulating our radical imagination precisely because it would omit the reason for embarking on something new in the first place—a reason which, at least for Jameson, can only lie in a dissatisfaction with the present. In this sense, Jameson's remark on the impossibility of absolute Otherness—which I claim is surpassed by videogame expression in a certain, limited sense—may be understood as an attempt to secure the critical and political potential of SF alternatives within the boundaries of our enlightened, 'scientific' society.

Juul (2005, 123-130), for example, discusses several incoherences and contradictions, such as multiple lives or impossible physical phenomena, arguing that players usually make such worlds coherent by referring to the game rules. In his example, the multiple lives granted to the player character Mario in *Donkey Kong* are not plausible—in the above sense of the word—and may only be explained by referring to the significance this rule has for the gameplay. "With only one life, the game would be too hard" (130). In general, videogames are intended to be playful and entertaining much more than they are meant to be plausible. In addition, they frequently mix genres, themes or signs in contradictory ways. Juul concludes that videogames are *Half-Real*, because they combine real rules with fictional worlds (1, 202). This suggests that even science fictional games might not fully withstand the plausibility test. Even if some omissions in videogames are simply abstractions, it would be challenging to argue that features like unlimited repetition of death and rebirth, the ability to save games, to carry heavy weight or large-size objects, etc. is continuous with our empirical reality.

Yet, I believe that the idea of an "aesthetic intuition" about plausibility, on the grounds of which the player may choose to ignore some of the elements in favour of an overall tendency, is useful. Here, I follow Freedman (1987, 181-182), who discusses the issue of clear-cut distinctions between fictional genres and suggests we circumvent this problem by

> displacing the category of genre from a static and classificatory to a dialectical sense. A literary genre—SF or any other—ought to be understood not as a pigeon-hole into which certain texts may be filed and certain others may not, but rather as an element or, still better, as tendency, which is active to a greater or lesser degree within a literary text which is itself conceptualized as a complexly structured whole. Accordingly, there is probably no text which is a perfect and pure embodiment of SF but, on the other hand, there are perhaps relatively few texts which lack the SF tendency altogether. […] *Star Wars* might be described as a work in which the SF tendency is visually strong but conceptually weak. It follows that, in the strictest sense, it is incorrect to say that any given text "is" or "is not" SF. But it is nonetheless justifiable to make an at least provisional discrimination on the basis of whether, in any actual text, the SF tendency is sufficiently strong to be considered dominant.

Freedman's proposal offers a practical solution to the problem of identifying "properly plausible" works for the analysis. In the selection, I follow his suggestion and identify works as sf if I intuitively expect their tendency towards science fictional plausibility strong enough, even if they are not plausible in all aspects.

The second addition concerns the problem of popularity. Renault points out that Suvin's exclusive emphasis on "cognitive estrangement" implies an elitist, intellectualizing focus on high culture. Suvin (1982, 21) himself proves Renault right in a later article on the range of sf, in which he cautions us against a tendency towards substituting the "radical novum" with "a slumming sensation that does not give rise to a parable on or counter-project to the established power." Against this exclusive focus on sf as an intellectual project of resistance, Renault (1980, 135) argues that textual signification is always a dialectic of the sensual and intellectual, and that "[c]ulture as cognition and affect combined, both deadly serious and playfully parodic, grounds political ambivalence; suppress this dialectic in theory or practice, and the real source of resistance is lost." In his view,

> SF […] strongly combines the fantasy "escapist" restorative function of mass culture with the instructive function of high culture. From this perspective we can see how SF can be entertaining and thought provoking at the same time. […] While prurient and escapist interests characterize the body of SF works, functionally such concerns are the vehicle for those critical cognitions SF offers. (137)

Renault's insistence on a broad view on sf and its "playfully parodic" elements is particularly important in the context of a playful, experiential medium. In videogames, the tension between frivolous entertainment and education, between sensual pleasures and intellectual endeavours, is not only played out in a game's fictional content or its rules, but also in serious and spontaneously playful action motivated by intellectual and emotional factors alike.[46] Insofar as this tension itself might generate productive conflicts, selection and analysis have to be open not only to tendency rather than strict boundaries, but also to frivolous entertainment just as well as to serious intellectual content.

46 The label "serious games" symbolizes the attempt to derive something 'meaningful,' socially accepted from a medium that is also just as much a silly and frivolous means for 'killing time' and for 'meaningless virtual killing.' Examining recent currents in game studies, McAllister and Ruggill (2010, 55) go as far as to say that, in times where video games are thus celebrated as meaningful and serious, "anamnesis" (the loss of forgetting), meaning a return to the "less valued" moment of videogame play, may be the only fruitful course for game studies in the future.

In the case of videogames, Renault's emphasis on mass entertainment is important for yet another reason. Given the high production costs of contemporary professional games, it is fair to say that the medium relies on popularity more than literature.[47] Although the search for disruptive conflicts has distanced my theoretical aim from Noël Carroll's perspective on mass art, his emphasis on accessibility and the importance of the audience is crucial for the following analysis. This is not to say that minor works cannot be expected to be equally disruptive. Against the background of the importance of playful frivolity in videogame expression, it does, however, demand for an unbiased (but not uncritical) view on mass-produced videogames. For the purpose of this exploration, I regard popularity as a helpful indicator in the initial search for interesting examples, leaving the questions about the quality of a work and its dialectic, ambivalent status between the sensual and the intellectual for the analysis. The following approach to the field of sf takes this perspective as a starting point, focusing on popular titles as well as less prominent but acclaimed works.

4.4 Sf in the Japanese Market

With these qualifications in mind, the following section aims to identify the recent shares of popular sf games in the Japanese videogame market. This means focusing on console games rather than the minor area of computer games, because the former have dominated the commercial scene until fairly recently, when they were challenged by cell phone games.[48] Popularity is usually measured in sales numbers.

47 The fact that games target mass consumption is not to say that this development is not ambivalent. Historically, the rising general popularity of videogames has both allowed for a wide range of experimental games to appear on the market, and, more recently, put increasing constraints on new productions, because the necessity to sell large quantities suggests a tendency towards established ideas and franchises. For Japan, Hichibe (2006, 68, 2009, 171) points out that the increasing development costs for console games force the designers more and more to stick with successful series and known formats, instead of experimenting with new ideas. While the historical production conditions of videogames are not subject to closer scrutiny in this thesis, it should be pointed out that the analytical focus on titles which were developed in the late 1990s and early 2000s or are part of a larger, long-running franchise, is not coincidental.

48 This choice should not imply that Japanese computer games may not be an intriguing, highly politically charged area of research and in some cases, reach astonishing levels of popularity. On the contrary: in Japan, computer games have been a vivid field of independent productions and amateur activities for a long time, and at the same time constitute a crucial playground for future game designers and programmers which, to some extent, exists outside of market logics and societal restrictions such as videogame rating and censorship. However, due to its subcultural status, this field is less accessible and thus requires a very

However, in the case of games, statistics need to be consulted with care, as the industry is generally reluctant to reveal their own figures. Some indication can be gained from data published by the industry itself, such as the charts found in the annually released *CESA Games White Paper*. In addition, the online portal *vgchartz.com* provides estimated annual records of the 100 top-selling games in Japan.

Sf is a well-established theme in the European and U.S. American market, where the pursuit of realistic and plausible worlds seems to be one major direction for high-budget productions such as *Call of Duty* or *Grand Theft Auto*, to name just a few popular examples. The Japanese market, however, appears to be less invested in the idea of natural grass movement and exact weapon reconstruction.[49] Even major titles are far less dominated by concerns with realism. For example, most of the Japanese role-playing games, which have developed into a globally recognized subgenre of role-playing games, are characterized by a mix of fantasy and sf elements.

This tendency impacts the prominence of sf in the statistics. Under the rubric "Past domestic million shipment titles," the *2012CESA Games White Paper* (Unozawa 2012, 228-233) lists 204 titles, which I have categorized in Table 1 on the following page. [50] The table shows that more than half of the titles belong to dominantly 'implausible,' or fantastic franchises, such as *Super Mario*, *Dragon Quest*, *Final Fantasy*, or *Pokémon*. Of the remainder, 51 titles are simulations, 14 are puzzles and edutainment, and 17 titles are implausible or abstract, but do not belong to any of the other categories (music games, titles like *Doraemon*). Among 204 videogames sold more than one million times in Japan, a total of 7 titles shows a sufficient tendency towards sf, namely *Chrono Trigger* and *RESIDENT EVIL 2* (both rank 65, with 2.030.000 units), *Resident Evil 3 Nemesis* (rank 111, 1.450.000 units), *XEVIOUS* (rank 141, 1.270.000 units), *Resident Evil* (rank 164, 1.110.000 units), *Parasite Eve* (rank 186, 1.060.000 units), and *Metroid* (rank 191, 1.040.000

different approach that is out of reach to this project.

49 On a technical level, Nintendo has withdrawn from the race for ever stronger consoles—more apt to represent realistic environments and complex physical processes required by most of the high-budget productions mentioned above—instead aiming for casual gaming and new consumers with the DS and the Wii. The latter in particular led to a series of games emphasizing bodily movement, which are arguably much more 'real' than any realistic visual representation, and, not by chance, contributed to a blurring of the categories of videogames and sports and fitness.

50 According to the *2012 White Paper* (Unozawa 2012, 233), the list is based on the responses of four companies to a research survey conducted for all titles released since 1983, as well as earlier data. Titles are given in Japanese and English in the original.

Table 1. Sf among the Japanese all-time million-sellers listed in the *2012 White Paper*.

A. Implausible series and franchises	
Mario	29
Dragon Quest	20
Final Fantasy	13
Pokémon	12
Kirby	7
Donkey Kong	5
Zelda	4
Dynasty Warriors	4
SaGa	4
Various (Monster Hunter, Super Smash Brothers, Dragon Ball, Inazuma 11, Yoshi's Island, Kindom Hearts, Secret of Mana, Arc the Lad)	17
subtotal	**115**
B. Simulations (fighting, racing, golf, baseball, mah-jong, horses, etc.)	51
C. Puzzle, Edutainment (Tetris, brain training, languages, etc.)	14
D. Miscellaneous	17
E. Science Fiction	
Chrono Trigger	1
Resident Evil [Japan: Biohazard]	3
XEVIOUS	1
Parasite Eve	1
Metroid	1
Final Fantasy VII (counted above under Final Fantasy)	
subtotal	**7**
total	**204**

units). One could argue for including *Final Fantasy VII* (rank 14, 4.000.000 units), because of its strong sf tendency, although most of the *Final Fantasy* franchise shares the general tendency of Japanese role-playing games to mix sf with fantastic features.[51] However, this does not change the fact that sf play a minor role on the market.

The picture looks slightly more diverse when considering the annual 100 top sales in Japan from 2000 to 2011 as listed by *vgchartz.com* (2012b).[52] Apart from

51 A good example of this mix of fantasy and sf is the game *Makai Tōshi SaGa* [*The Final Fantasy Legend*] of which the English Wikipedia (2012) entry remarks that "the game features equipment from different genres, ranging from magic and swords of **fantasy** to **plasma rifles** and chainsaws of **science fiction**."

52 According to their own description, v*gchartz.com* (2012a) employs a broad range of

the numerous ambiguous role-playing games (hereafter rpg), these charts display a more or less stable 10-15 percent of sf titles for each year. I have compiled the popular sf titles found in this data between 2000 and 2011 in Table 2.

Table 2. Sf titles among the top 100 sales between 2000 and 2011 as listed by *vgchartz.com*.

Franchises/Series	Number	Individual Titles	Year
Gundam	39	Dino Crisis 2 (PS)	2000
Super Robot Wars	19	Extermination (PS2)	2001
Mega Man	15	Zone of the Enders (PS2)	2001
Resident Evil [Biohazard]	14	Disaster Report (PS2)	2002
Metal Gear Solid	10	Metroid Fusion (GBA)	2003
Armored Core	5	Classic NES Series: Xevious (GBA)	2004
Ace Combat	5	Famicom Mini: Star Soldier (GBA)	2004
.hack	5	Global Defence Force (PS2)	2005
Sakura Wars	4	Lost Planet 2 (PS3)	2010
Another Century's Episode	4	God Eater (PSP)	2010
Macross	4	Gods Eater Burst (PSP)	2010
Custom Robo	3	Steins;Gate (PSP)	2011
Star Fox	2	Black * Rock Shooter: The Game (PSP)	2011
Front Mission	2	Chikyuu Boueigun 2 Portable (PSP)	2011
total franchise/series	**131**	**total individual titles**	**14**
added total	**145**		
scope of the thesis	**119**		

The data indicates that the market share of Japanese sf videogames is mostly dominated by a few large and long-time franchises on the one hand, and the theme of giant robots, or "mecha"[53], on the other. Adapting popular anime content, the titles belonging to *Gundam*, *Another Century's Episode*, and *Macross* amount to almost one third (47) out of a total of 145 games. Together with other mecha series like the *Custom Robo*, *Armored Core*, *Front Mission*, and *Mega Man*, these games represent

methods to estimate sales numbers, such as polling with gamers and retailers, statistical trend fitting, price analysis, and industry consultations.

53 Mecha is the English version of the Japanese term *meka*, itself a short form adapted from the English terms "mechanism" and "mechanical." According to the English and Japanese entries in Wikipedia (2013k, l) the term is widely used to refer to machines in Japan. In the context of Japanese popular culture, it commonly refers to the science fictional device of robots controlled by human pilots. Early prominent examples of mecha are the manga *Mazinger Z* published by Nagai Gō between 1972 and 1973, or the tv anime series *Mobile Suit Gundam* from 1979, which developed into one of the most influential cross-media franchises in Japan. I use the term mecha throughout this analysis to refer to such robots.

the strongest current in the field of Japanese SF videogames. Other themes and series like *Resident Evil* [in Japan released as *Biohazard*] or *.hack* are less prominent, and the number of successful individual titles is relatively small.

In the table, the number of titles which meet the sf-requirement of this thesis does not include the *Super Robot Wars* series, the *Sakura Wars* series, and the *Star Fox* games. This decision is based on the ambiguity towards sf these series display. Whether in the shape of magical or spiritual powers the mecha or their players possess in *Super Robot Wars* and *Sakura Wars*, or by replacing human pilots with animal characters, like in *Star Fox*, these games break openly with the demand for plausibility identified as a major requirement for sf.

This preliminary selection is supported and refined by two additional factors. Firstly, it was tested, verified, and adjusted during a long-term research stay in Japan. This trip gave me the opportunity to gather information about potentially interesting games in textual resources as well as in random, explorative interviews with players and videogame researchers, who contributed greatly to the insight I have gained so far into the field. Easy access to a broad range of games, some of which were never released outside of Japan, allowed me to pursue the various leads in a timely and in-depth fashion. This pre-analytic phase not only supported the choice of some of the abovementioned titles for the analysis, thus lending some support to the vague statistical data. It also resulted in several new discoveries, some of which have made their way to the consecutive chapters. To give an overview of the scope of this thesis, I have combined the statistical results with the pre-analytic exploration in Table 3, and grouped them according to the attention they are given in the analysis.

In Table 3, the discoveries from my fieldwork are highlighted in grey. From top to bottom it lists the games analysed in detail, titles only mentioned briefly, titles not mentioned due to their lack of potential or simply due to time constraints, and titles excluded from the closer range due to platform issues. The last category reflects several adjustments to the selection. Given the difficulties involved in recording handheld console gameplay, I have excluded all titles only or dominantly available for portable devices in order to maintain methodical consistency in the data collection process. Given the scarcity of titles not designed or at least available for Sony's Playstation consoles Playstation (herafter PSX), Playstation 2 (hereafter PS2), and Playstation 3 (hereafter PS3), I further decided to limit the scope to titles for Sony's platforms. While this results in excluding important series like *Custom*

Table 3. Games within the scope of this thesis, categorized by the attention given to them.

Category	Franchise(F)/Title(T)****	Year	Chapter(s)
discussed	Gundam (F)	1980s~	A.0
	Metal Gear Solid (F)	1998~	A.3
	Armored Core (F)	1997~	A.0
	Ace Combat (F)	1992~	A.0
	Front Mission (F)	1995~	A.0
	Chrono Trigger (T)	1995	A.1
	Global Defence Force** (T)	2005	A.2
	Rez (T)	2001	A.2
	Shinseiki Evangelion 2 [Neon Genesis Evangelion 2] (T)	2003	A.2
	Shadow of Memories (T)	2001	A.1
mentioned (titles explored but not analyzed in depth)	Biohazard [Resident Evil] (F)	1996~	A.3
	Another Century's Episode (F)	2005~	A.0
	Lost Planet 2 (T)	2010	A.3
not mentioned (titles dimissed in the initial exploration or left for future work)	Mega Man (F)	1987~	
	.hack (F)	2002~	
	Macross (F)	1980s~	
	Parasite Eve (T)	1998	
	Dino Crisis 2 T)	2000	
	Extermination (T)	2001	
	Zone of the Enders (T)	2001	
	Disaster Report (T)	2002	
	Gunparade March*** (T)	2000	
	Shinseiki Evangelion: Jo [Neon Genesis Evangelion:Jo] (T)	2009	
	Koufuku Sousakan [Happiness Investigator] (T)	2004	
out of immediate or technical range (handheld titles or differing platform)	Custom Robo (F)	1999	
	Metroid (F)	1986~	
	Classic NES Series: Xevious (T)	2004	
	Famicom Mini: Star Soldier (T)	2004	
	God Eater (T)	2010	
	Gods Eater Burst (T)	2010	
	Steins;Gate (T)	2011	
	Black * Rock Shooter: The Game (T)	2011	
	Chikyuu Boueigun 2 Portable [Earth Defense Force 2 Portable] (T) **	2011	
	Pikmin (F)	2001	

* Asterix in Black * Rock Shooter in the original title.

** Discussing the first title of the series, The Earth Defense Forces.

*** Game system discussed in the context of Neon Genesis Evangelion 2.

**** This differentiation indicates the status of the item listed.

Robo or *Metroid*, its merit for this project is that it helps reduce the factors involved in the analysis, such as differences between consoles and controller types.

4.5 Conclusions

This chapter provided a rough overview of Japanese sf videogames, which serves as a starting point for the following analysis. The aim was to arrive at a relatively small, consistent pre-selection of titles and franchises for the following analysis. In the first parts, I have discussed the characteristics of sf and provided some justification for focusing on this genre in the initial exploration. Based on the notion of a tendency towards plausibility and the index of popularity, I have analysed statistical data on videogame sales and actively explored the Japanese market. With several additional restrictions, this resulted in a list of games for closer consideration.

This list may not reflect the market share and range of Japanese sf videogames accurately, because it excludes the vast field of amateur and professional computer games. However, I do believe that it serves its purpose of providing a rough overview of the field targeted in this project, and thus a sufficient starting point for the analysis. I have tried to make the process and the conditions leading to the selection of works as transparent as possible and hope to have provided enough background to contextualize the consecutive observations both from an academic perspective, and against the background of the field of Japanese videogames. I hope that future work can focus on those areas and titles not examined in depth here.