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5 Mechapocalypse

Let’s make no mistake: whether it’s the drop-outs, the beat generation, automobile drivers, migrant workers, tourists, Olympic champions or travel agents, the military-industrial democracies have made every social category, without distinction, into unknown soldiers of the order of speeds. (Virilio 2006, 136-137)

In the last chapter, I defined the material field for the analysis. The following chapter shifts the attention to its contents, discussing several major currents in Japanese science fictional videogames. Examining both adapted and original videogames, I focus on the ways in which the pervasive trope of mecha—giant robots controlled by human pilots—is deployed in computopic universes. This preparatory analysis provides insight into the field and points to several common potentials and limitations of science fictional games, which serve as a basis for later examinations.

5.1 Science Fictional Skins

The statistical data suggests that some of the most popular sf games are adaptations of mecha anime. This is true for Gundam games, which are part of the Gundam franchise and mostly adapted from the various Gundam anime that appeared since the late 1970s, and the crossover54 series Another Century’s Episode (hereafter A.C.E.), which adapts story elements, characters and, most importantly, mecha from a wide range of works.55 According to Linda Hutcheon (2006, 8) an adaptation is an “acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work or works,” a “creative and an interpretive act of appropriation/salvaging,” and an “extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work.” In her analysis, “the adaptive faculty is the ability to repeat without copying, to embed difference in similarity, to be at once both self and Other” (174). In their emphasis on fluidity and contingency, adaptations can be subversive, because they “destabilize both formal and cultural identity and thereby shift power relations” (164).

54 A “fictional crossover” is a special case of adaptation, in which different independent works are adapted (Wikipedia 2013h).
55 As opposed to the Super Robot Wars franchise, which includes so-called “super-robots”—mecha, which have fantastic powers—A.C.E. restricts its pool to “real robots”—referring to mecha more or less explainable by real-world science (Wikipedia 2013a, s, m).
However, a brief examination of the adaptive strategies in *Gundam* and *A.C.E.* reveals the limitations of such subversive potentials. Covering a broad range of videogame genres and subgenres from first-person and third-person shooters to strategy role-playing games, *Gundam* displays a variety of adaptive strategies.\(^{56}\) Titles like *Giren no Yabō [Gihren’s Ambition]* (2002) or *Ichinen Sensō [One Year War]* (2005), make a considerable effort to contextualize the gameplay with a narrative corresponding to the anime, thus offering an alternative, more subjective experience of the respective story adapted. In contrast, the majority of games reduces the context to a minimal reference in the shape of a rough narrative framing or by presenting characters, mecha—in *Gundam* called “mobile suits”—and locations familiar from one of the anime. As **Example 5.1** shows, this tendency is particularly strong in the “arcade mode” of the *Gundam* VS. sub-series (hereafter VS.).\(^{57}\) While introducing the context of the games roughly in the prologue, these games decontextualize the action from the familiar narrative. This is most strikingly the case in the “arcade mode,” which confronts the player with a series of loosely connected scenarios. They reduce the link to a vague reference to setting, while at the same time offering a wide range of correspondently adapted but decontextualized characters and mobile suits.

In more than one case, the choices available or the results of a mission openly contradict the anime narrative. Such subversion is more actively explored in the strategy rpg of the *SD Gundam GGeneration* series.\(^{58}\) Offering a high degree of freedom when it comes to choosing pilots for the various machines and mobile suits available, as well as the possibility of convincing less fundamentalist villains to change sides during the battle, these games create situations not in line with the original anime. Such deconstructive tendencies are even stronger in the third-person shooter games of the *A.C.E.* series, which combine mecha, characters,

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\(^{56}\) At the time of writing (July 2013), the *Gundam* franchise includes 44 titles for the Playstation alone, not to mention other platforms (Wikipedia 2013i). Due to time constraints, the analysis can only focus on some of these titles. I tried to cover the most important sub-series and sequels.


and story elements from more than one franchise. As a general tendency, these titles feature an adaptive strategy that reduces the source material to elements of a database shuffled according to need and player choice. In this they are examples of postmodern database consumption, a term coined by Japanese philosopher Azuma Hiroki. Azuma (2001, 71-83) argues that the trend towards decontextualizing characters from the “grand narrative” culminates in a database of characters and character elements, which can be recombined in myriad ways and exist outside any specific narrative context.

This tendency towards a 'databasification' of decontextualized elements also converges with the themability of games mentioned above (see chapter 2, p. 34), revealing the mecha and even the characters to be scarcely more than decorative skins. Combining various elements of Gundam with the gameplay of the successful beat’em up series Shin Sangoku Musō [Dynasty Warriors], the Gundam Musō [Dynasty Warriors: Gundam] games deploy this practice most explicitly. Gundam Musō confronts the player with epic martial arts battles against several hundred enemy mobile suits and rewards high kill-rates—a stark contrast to the anime with its emphasis on the psychological struggle of inexperienced civilians forced to fight over life and death and the terrors of war in general. In a different way, the above-mentioned VS. series deploys inter- and intra-game skinning practices, reusing its framework and format (and possibly parts of the software code) in successive titles or deploying a minimal number of stages in a large number of contexts.

These observations hint to another dimension of adaptations, namely their economic aspects. In general, economic considerations are certainly a dominant force behind the majority of the Gundam games. Hutcheon (2006, 30) grants that “[v]ideogames derived from popular films and vice versa are clearly ways to capitalize on a ‘franchise’ and extend its market.” However, she claims that

59 For this analysis, I played Another Century’s Episode (2005) and Another Century’s Episode R (2010).

60 For a more detailed discussion, see Schäfer and Roth (2012).

61 The third-person fighting games offer a choice of characters among the historical figures known from the “Three Kingdoms” period in China (220-280 AD), which the player has to reunite.

62 For the analysis, I played Gundam Musō 2 (2008a) and Gundam Musō Special (2008b).

63 A similar tendency is present in the SD Gundam GGeneration, in which notable changes are mostly of aesthetic nature or concern the referenced work(s). My analysis of “Playing ‘Naruto’” (Roth 2013) suggests that this is not unique to the Gundam games, but a might be considered a general current in (Japanese) manga, anime and games (production) culture. It would be interesting to analyze the impact such practice has on the economic model the game production and the franchise as a whole is based on.
economic considerations are always part of adaptations.\textsuperscript{64} In the case of \textit{Gundam} and arguably also \textit{A.C.E.}, the appearance of familiar mecha and characters is likely to be the major factor for the popularity of what would otherwise be highly repetitive videogames lacking narrative depth to an extent where they are presumably hard to follow for outsiders. Contributing to one or multiple major franchises, these games also play a role as advertisements for other products, just as the original mecha anime series were sponsored by toy makers like Bandai, who expected elevated sales of real-life models of the mecha and other series-related toys for children. A particularly prolific part of the \textit{Gundam} franchise, the “super deformed” \textit{SD Gundam GGeneration} games are a striking case of the economics behind adaptations.\textsuperscript{65} However, the fact that the “super deformed” style is presumed to be a strategy of circumventing licensing fees to the \textit{Gundam} license holder Sunrise (Wikipedia 2013q), the series also indicates the complexity of the economic dimension of franchises and adaptations in general, which cannot be discussed in detail here.

In summary, games committed to—accurate or original—storytelling tend to offer alternative perspectives and subjective experiences of the \textit{Gundam} world. However, the majority of games discussed so far tend towards decontextualization, databasification, standardization and skinning. These games arguably offer their fan-players what Hutcheon (2006, 117) calls the intertextual pleasure of “understanding the interplay between works, of opening up a text’s possible meanings to intertextual echoing.” They also develop a considerable deconstructive force with respect to the original \textit{Gundam} universe. However, by abstracting the narrative, characters and mecha from their context and from their specific features, they also reduce its political content\textsuperscript{66} to a choice between different skins only meaningful for insiders. The lack of novel contributions to the \textit{Gundam} universe most of the games display marks them as highly self-reflexive.

\textsuperscript{64} This should be taken as a claim about professional adaptations that have a commercial background. Amateur- and fan-works certainly follow other intentions and may, to some extent, be regarded as adaptations for the sake of adaptations. Unfortunately, Hutcheon does not discuss this area in any depth.

\textsuperscript{65} \textit{SD} stands for “super deformed.” According to the Wikipedia (2013p) entry, this style of ‘shrunked’ tiny representations of \textit{Gundam} mobile suits is in use in parts of the franchise since the 1980s. It has developed from a playful parody to a highly successful sub-franchise which spawned several spin-off series and merchandise.

\textsuperscript{66} Traditionally set up as a future armed conflict between different fractions of humanity and post-humanity, \textit{Gundam} features rich political themes in a science fictional setting, explored through an overarching narrative as well as by depicting the individual physical and psychological struggles of the characters caught up in the war.
Notably, Hutcheon (2006, 14) claims that videogame adaptations not only have to meet the demands of a “truth-of-correspondence,” or a reference to the universe of the adapted text, but also that of a “truth-of-coherence,” meaning a plausibility of the action in the context of the game. Turned around, the fact that the abovementioned games fail to convince as adaptations offers an opportunity for taking a closer look at them as games in their own right. The next section analyses how *Gundam* games adapt elements of a major franchise into various established videogame genres.

5.2 **Survival Training**

The mix of adapted narrative elements (background, characters, mecha) and gameplay in *Gundam* games provides an interesting case for Hutcheon’s (2006, 121) claim that successful adaptations have to be equally accessible to knowing and unknowing audiences. On the one hand, the abstracted, reshuffled or even lacking narratives found in most of these games are hardly intelligible for unknowing audiences. On the other hand, the gameplay of many titles is intuitive enough to be grasped immediately. At times confronting the player with tough challenges, the rules and controls are nonetheless simple enough to be mastered to a certain extent, and the instructions are easy enough to understand instantly.\(^67\)

In the following section, I take a look at the two most prominent videogame genres *Gundam* is adapted to, namely shooters and strategy role-playing games. In most cases dominated by third-person combat action on ground and in space, the shooters deploy the mobile suits with their enduring armour, ability to fly, and set of super-sized, deadly weapons as human enhancements. The titles of the VS. series reduce the complexity of controls, truthful to their arcade framing. More sophisticated examples like *Climax U.C.* (2006) or the A.C.E. series feature complex manoeuvres and make use of the full range of the controller. **Example 5.2** shows how these shooters display a tendency towards fast-paced reaction and emphasize hand-eye coordination, which is particularly striking in the 2.5D shoot’em up *Mobile Suit Gundam Seed* (2003).

As a tendency, the action in these games converges towards decontextualized

\(^{67}\) It might be interesting to test whether this is true even for players with no knowledge of Japanese. I suspect that many gamers would not find it difficult to play the games more or less successfully, particularly if they are familiar with the respective genres.
reaction to the accelerated flow of information on the screen. Required of the player are analytical skills to decipher the screen quickly, and a corresponding set of control skills necessary to react to its signals. Hand-eye coordination is arguably part of many videogames to various extents, and pedagogical research has long highlighted its value as a skill in the contemporary world (see for example Witting 2007, 24). Besides the sensorimotor skills, a recent study of cognitive dimension of first-person shooter play indicates that such games promote cognitive flexibility and cognitive-control skills (Colzato et al. 2010). However, at the same time, visual acceleration promotes a kind of ‘responsive irresponsibility’ and a double vision on the part of the player. One has to identify and evade the most immediate threat, be it projectiles, obstacles, or the enemy, while constantly searching for new targets elsewhere on the screen and trusting the automatic trigger to remain on the target until destroyed. The attention moves on to the next target as soon as one has reason to believe that the momentary target will be destroyed by the last fired projectile. However, there is no time to reflect on or even focus on either the individual enemy, or the moment of destruction. In a way, I believe this is an experience similar to Walter Benjamin’s ([1936] 2002, 119-120) well-known description of film-viewing as tactile, habitual “reception in distraction,” which, albeit already ascribed a physical quality by Benjamin, should be qualified further by adding the term “intense,” to account for the active, physical involvement of the player.68

In their intense reception in distraction, these shooters offer a taste of Paul Virilio’s (2006) dystopic vision of an accelerated, dromological future, in which speed is superiority, and “to be quick means to stay alive” (70). In the contemporary “war of Time,” he says, knowing-power is replaced by moving-power (71), and the world as a field of (political) action comes to an end (152). At times of accelerated speed and ubiquitous accessibility to destruction, Virilio believes that the struggle for maintaining a certain margin of political reaction time—time for reasoned decisions—in order not to be replaced by automation of defence and decision is lost (155). In his view, “[t]he blindness of the speed of means of communicating destruction is not a liberation from geopolitical servitude, but the extermination of space as the field of freedom of political action. […] the more speed increases, the faster freedom decreases” (158). Ultimately, speed converges towards an instantaneousness of decision. The final power would thus be less one

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68 For a brief discussion of how Benjamin’s conceptualization of the “modes of perception” and “reception in distraction” relate to contemporary media, see Schäfer and Roth (2012).
of imagination than of anticipation, so much so that to govern would be no more than to foresee, simulate, memorize the simulations; that the present ‘Research Institute’ could appear to be the blueprint of this final power, the power of utopia. (157)

In the light of Virilio’s analysis of politics in times of acceleration, the abovementioned shooter games and their emphasis on hand-eye coordination or analysis-reaction take on an ambivalent meaning. These skills could be said to prepare their players for behaving—or at least surviving—in a culture dominated by fast-paced information flows and visual representation. However, insofar as the games emphasize instantaneous decision, reaction and anticipation instead of reasoning, imagination and action, they do not offer any alternative to the contemporary tendency towards acceleration, but rather in play reflect it. As far as I can see, this reflection is not critical but admiring of speed.

The turn-based strategy rpg, on the other hand, interrupts the flow of time. The titles of the SD Gundam G Generation series feature chess-like gameplay in which the player takes turns with the computer in strategic role-playing fights and can think about the next move as long as he or she wants. In command of several units in bird-eye scenarios, one has to make tactical and strategic choices appropriate to defeat the enemy. Each unit has a specified range of movement and attacks, which are to be used to the player’s advantage. Gradually, one can upgrade the equipment, regroup soldiers and gear, and create individual teams for the battles to come. Given Virilio’s (2006, 156) claim that with increasing acceleration, space (territory) as the central contested category in war is replaced by time, these turn-based, de-temporalized games with their strong emphasis on space and distances might be regarded as a counter-movement. Yet, at the same time, these games deploy the numerous mecha of the franchise to create high information density, further amplified by customization options. This turns the games into vast spaces of functional configuration and re-combination of the decontextualized database elements mentioned above.

Again, this is an ambivalent feature. On the one hand, these games promote skills of analysing and understanding complex information systems and databases in times of an ever-increasing importance and influence of such systems. As such,

69 In a similar way, Benjamin’s (2002, 119) shock effect of the cinema, originating from “successive changes of scene and focus” and thus from speed. According to Benjamin (2002, 120-121), this made film the “true training ground” for the new apperception necessary in times of increasing “aestheticizing of political life” by fascism.
they confront the player with a high information density and offer an intense but
playful experience of mastery. Volker Grassmuck (2000, no pn) discusses “otaku,”
a Japanese term referring to passionate or ‘extreme’ fans of manga, anime, games
and related fields of interest, as a new strategy of dealing with the information age.
At the end of the 20th century, he observes, “[h]ardly anybody is not affected by the
flood of information and plethora of media. The increasing flow-velocity of our life
processes forces us to simultaneously partake in ever-more projects in ever-more
places together with ever-more people.” In contrast to attempts of responding to
this new information density by flexibility and multi-tasking,

[the otaku are trying out a solution that goes in the opposite direction.]
Their urge to appropriate the world is motivated by the ambition to
swap the borderlessness of the social cosmos for the microcosmos of
collecting, of games, or of the machine. This radical limitation enables
them to form an identity and bundle together a life story as a narrative.
If the multiple represents opening up, then the otaku represents closing
off. (Grassmuck 2000)

Based on my own research into the otaku culture (Roth 2011), I doubt that these
claims can be generalized. Nevertheless, the videogames in question deploy their
mecha to generate information density, and offer ways to master it. In this sense,
these videogames resemble Grassmuck’s otaku world, because they offer a coher-
ent, closed computopic space and strategies for and the experience of “mastering
the social and psychological uncertainties of our age” (Grassmuck 2000).

In this, they depend on a mechanism similar to the closure Jameson regards as
crucial for successful utopian imaginaries. However, as in the case of the shooters,
this closed space features characteristics similar to those of our empirical reality,
but does not offer alternatives to it. In order to qualify this statement, I would like
to distinguish between creative and repetitive information, and the corresponding
strategies of engaging with data. McKenzie Wark (2006) draws such distinction in
A Hacker Manifesto [version 4.0], albeit in the peculiar terminology of production
vs. hacking and communication vs. information. He claims that “[w]here
communication merely requires the repetition of this commodified difference,
information is the production of the difference of difference” ( No. 40). A hack
“produces a production of a new kind, which has as its result a singular and unique
product, and a singular and unique producer” ( No. 8). Production, in turn, “takes
place on the basis of a prior hack which gives to production its formal, social,
repeatable and reproducible form. Every production is a hack formalised and repeated on the basis of its representation. To produce is to repeat; to hack, to differentiate” (No. 9).

Converting these statements into my terminology, one could say that his description of communication fits my notion of a repetitive engagement with data, because it deploys a formalized, pre-defined difference, whereas his notion of information matches creative engagements, because it entails a novel way of engaging with data. Against this background, I would argue that the potential for creative information in the abovementioned games is limited to their deconstructive function in the context of the adapted franchise, because none of these games features a novel strategy for producing information. Instead, they perpetuate the contemporary conditions and promote repetitive strategies of managing information rather than creating it anew. To invoke Carroll and Adorno (see chapter 2, p. 8), these games deploy “commonplaces” and offer accessible scenarios rather than confronting us with disruptive conflicts capable of stimulating independent, radical imagination.

In contrast to the abovementioned shooters, turn-based strategy games appear to offer their players what is lost in acceleration: time to think and make decisions about the future. Yet, a closer look reveals that these games only shift the plane, from accelerated reaction to strategies of managing information density and complexity. In sum, both cases are characterized by acceleration and density. The skills needed to survive their scenarios are similar to those required of us in the empirical reality. Since speed and data are central elements of the computopic, it should not surprise us that they play an important role in many games. However, the following sections show that they can be deployed in more radical, provocative ways than we encountered here.

5.3 Future War

Given the strong tendency towards agonist or competitive challenges in videogames in general, and their fraternity with war simulations of all kinds70, it may not surprise that several successful independent works and series share the theme

70 In his dissertation on the origins of videogames and their philosophical significance, Claus Pias (2000, 163-197) showed that strategy games were always strongly intertwined with military strategy, planning and war simulations.
of war with the abovementioned adaptations. Developed as original videogame series, *Front Mission*, *Ace Combat*, and *Armored Core* place the action within genuinely novel, sophisticated and temporally and spatially extensive science fictional universes (i.e. Figure 5).

![Front Mission world map](image)

**Figure 5.** *Front Mission* world map. Source: Tenmou.net (2013c).

The turn-based strategy rpg of the *Front Mission* series\(^{71}\), for example, are set in the 21\(^{st}\) and 22\(^{nd}\) century.\(^{72}\) In a future based on the present situation of 1995, when the series’ first title *Front Mission* was published, several supranational republics are formed in the early 2000s, such as the European Community (EC), the Republic of Zaftra (formed around Russia), the United States of the New Continent (USN), the Oceania Cooperative Union (OCU), as well as the instable Organization of African Consolidation (OAC). Due to several developments, the UN are rendered insignificant in the 21\(^{st}\) century and are replaced by the Peace Mediation Organization (PMO) founded by Zaftra, only to regain strength in the early 22\(^{nd}\) century with the support of the USN. Despite these developments, the world remains highly instable, with several coups d’état and anti-state terror on the rise.\(^{73}\)


\(^{72}\) If not specified further, information about the game world origins in my own exploration of the game or the fan site tenmou.net (2013a).

\(^{73}\) For an overview of the *Front Mission* history, see the history section of tenmou.net (2013b, 2013c).
By basing its future on real world facts the series creates a plausible future world. This approach is also applied to technology, as Pineda, Thompson and Tam (2011, 1) point out:

Game mechanics aside, *Front Mission’s* true strength comes from its design and story elements. The biggest design influence is the series’ grounded realism; the setting is based off of near-future trends of how our world will evolve. For example, the technology of the series has real-life applications. *Front Mission*’s cast of characters come from all over the world, from Venezuela to Korea to even Iceland.

As an important element in the gameplay, the games introduce mecha called “wanzers”74 which the player can customize with various weapons of short, middle and long range and upgrade to optimize them for the enemy forces awaiting. In the missions or stages, which sometimes take more than one hour to complete, player and computer take turns in directing the attacks and movements of their wanzers.

The temporally and spatially extensive future world with its advanced technologies and never ceasing conflicts not only provides the basis for these missions or stages, but also serves as a background for discussing various political and philosophical problems. “In keeping with the series’ near-future roots, each game focuses on particular military, political, scientific, and philosophical themes that form the core of their stories. For example, a major recurring theme in the games is the struggle between globalization and nationalism” (Pineda, Thompson, and Tam 2011, 1). While not the most esteemed title of the series, *front mission 3* is a good example of the series’ “grounded realism” and its political commentary.

Set in the year 2112, the player begins the game in Japan. One quickly learns that future Japan has maintained its non-aggression policy on the surface, while embarking on humanitarian aid missions and conducting weapon systems development beneath. During the “Emma-storyline,”75 protagonist Takemura Kazuki aids the foreign scientist Emma in the pursuit of a stolen new weapon of mass destruction called “M.I.D.A.S.,” at the same time trying to rescue his sister Alisa, who is abducted for her scientific knowledge about this weapon. The game

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74 The term is compiled of the German words *Wandern* (to hike, to wander, to move around) and *Panzer* (tank).

75 Depending on a choice very early into the game, the player pursues one of two storylines in the game. I have only played the “Emma-Storyline” and the following remarks are based on this experience.
is infused with themes like war victims, weapons technology, and violence, and offers diverse moments of reflection on these issues, some of which I have included in Example 5.3. The protagonist is not a soldier but an engineer and test pilot. The story touches upon individual experiences of war and killing several times, while nonetheless maintaining that Kazuki and the player have no choice but to fight against the attackers. In the context of the overarching story, Emma, who is responsible for developing M.I.D.A.S., repeatedly agonizes over her action and responsibility to mankind, in particular after the weapon is used by an over-ambitious general.

However, despite the game’s absorbing pace and depth, these reflexive episodes remain somewhat superficial. Much more than the rudimentary and unemotional animation techniques used in the dialogues, this is a result of the fact that the gameplay itself does not reflect this critique of violence and war technologies. On the contrary, featuring customizable mecha and diverse weapons in a very similar way to the abovementioned Gundam rpgs, it immerses the player into technology and rewards a certain amount of admiration and enthusiasm. More importantly, the battles remain superficial in their treatment of the terrors of war and the fight over life and death, as Example 5.4 shows. Human beings are visible only upon escape from their wanzers and, most of the time, the action does not refer to the death or injuries of those involved in the fights. At the same time, the player has to kill every single opponent, even when they have left their machinery and pose no substantial threat any more. Yet, complete destruction of a team member’s wanzer does not lead to fatal injuries, and neither causes a loss of the robot: if the mission can still be completed, machine and pilot are restored. In general, each fight during the runaway starts with full specs—ammunition, armour, etc. This is not just an

76 English subtitles for *front mission 3* taken from Unos Hambalos’ (2007) *Front Mission 3 - Game Script (EMMA).*

77 This may be a “commonplace” in Carroll’s sense. A similar element is deployed in the *Gundam* story, in which civilian protagonist pilots agonize over their unwilling involvement in violent conflicts and war.

78 I will come back to this tension in a later analysis of *Metal Gear Solid*, where it is explored far more actively and with the player as target (see chapter 8, p. 142).

79 This is why Dave Connoy (2003) gives the following advice in his walkthrough: “Don’t be afraid of death. The HP of all the parts of all of your wanzers is fully restored at the end of each battle, and dead pilots are even magically resurrected! Fight every battle to the bitter end, because you never know what lucky break might come your way. Of course, an arduous battle of attrition will reflect badly on your ranking, so you may want to redo the stage anyway.” I will come back to the rather common foregrounding of score over death suggested here in a later chapter.
example of the rule-based contradictions with plausibility the *Half-Real* (Juul) status of videogames (see chapter 4, p. 64) can cause. What is more important here is that these contradictions are counterproductive to the game’s attempt at delivering a critical message.

*Front Mission 5: Scars of the War* deals with the problem of physical, mental, and emotional damage inflicted by war in more sophisticated ways. Following the protagonist, USN soldier Walter Feng, into an armed conflict with the opposing OCU, the story touches upon the victims of war, including the traumatized soldiers, and further problematizes experiments with brain manipulation and soldier enhancement: A soldier in the enemy forces, Walter’s friend-of-youth Glen Duval is subjected to such experiments and ends up killing their mutual childhood friend Randy O’Neill, whom he no longer recognizes after the manipulation. However, as in *Front Mission 3*, these critical elements are presented almost entirely through the narrative, be it in scripted dialogues or cut-scenes.

A similar divide between narrative and gameplay can be found in the *Ace Combat* series80, albeit in a very different shape. *Ace Combat* is a first person flight combat simulation.81 From *Ace Combat 2* to *Ace Combat 6*, the series is set in the fictional world “Strangereal” (for more details, see wikia 2013b) shown in Figure 6.

![Figure 6. Strangereal political map. Source: Ícaro Ghost37 (2013).](image)


81 If not specified further, information about the game world origin in the player’s own exploration of the game or the wikia online encyclopedia section “Acepedia” (2013c).
A major event in the history of Strangereal is the so-called Belkan war, which is also the main subject of *Ace Combat Zero: The Belkan War*. After failing to avert a severe economic crisis, the Belkan government is replaced by a faction of the far right wing, which brings the country back to economic prosperity and invests majorly in a strong military. In 1995, the Belkans deploy their military force in an invasion of their neighbouring countries. The success of these expansive campaigns prompts the two super-powers Osea and Yuktobania to enter the conflict against Belka. Forced back onto their main territory after several months of fighting against an overwhelming enemy, the Belkans decide to drop seven nuclear bombs on their own borderlands in order to build a wall that stops the invading forces. The war weakens the superpowers considerably, because their forces are outmatched by Belkan military technology. In the aftermath, they dismantle their nuclear weapons and elect peaceful governments—not without first creating secret military elite forces (see Radford 2006, SY01).82

Whereas *Ace Combat Zero* presents the player with a retrospective on the experiences and missions of a legendary pilot in the Belkan War, *Ace Combat 5* opens with Yuktobania once again declaring open war on Osea 15 years later. Both games feature immersive stories83 with a set of interesting characters.84 Despite their difficult controls, they offer a thrilling and highly entertaining experience of aerial dogfighting.

At first glance, *Ace Combat 5* resembles a realistic flight simulation, since it features dozens of different real-world aircraft, including plenty of American classics like the F-16 Fighting Falcon and the F/A-18 Hornet, as well as Russian planes like the Su-27 and MiG-29. State-of-the-art fighters like the F-22 and classic jets like the F-4 and A-10 Warthog 82 This all suggests strong similarities with our own history, albeit with certain important alterations. According to the entry on the “Belkan War” in the *Acepedia* on wikia (2013a) “[t]he Belkan War is based heavily on World War II, with elements of the Gulf War.” This interpretation is supported by the German-sounding names of Belkan companies etc. Yet, the appearance of nuclear weapons also suggests some influence of the Japanese history and the Asia-Pacific War. Unfortunately, a preliminary search could not determine the intentions behind the alterations made to this historical basis, particularly with regards to the nuclear bombs which are dropped by Belka itself.

83 “Ace Combat’s continued devotion to good storytelling is ultimately one of this game’s best strengths, since the presence of so much plot helps to give the missions a sense of genuine significance and cinematic drama. The high-quality voice acting, constant radio chatter, and stirring, dynamic music combine with the action very well, giving Ace Combat 5 an epic feel.” (Kasavin 2004)

84 According to Michael Radford (2006, CH01), this was not always the case in earlier *Ace Combat* games.
are also represented. In real life, some of these jets handle drastically differently, but despite its realistic looks (complete with gorgeously detailed plane models and cockpits, and authentic heads-up displays), Ace Combat 5 is clearly not intended to be a realistic flight simulation.

(Review by Greg Kasavin posted on Gamespot.com 2004)

Nonetheless, in its attempt to bridge real aerial combat with entertaining gameplay, the series does approach (the illusion of) a realistic experience in its graphics and gameplay deliberately—to this end, the designers for example gain expertise from the Japanese self-defence forces. To the extent to which *Ace Combat* aims to offer realistic experiences, the vector points towards our empirical reality—even if this is a reality not likely to be part of most people’s experience. Although the individual player may break out of his or her present in these games, this experience in itself does not feature any radical alternatives departing from our reality in drastic ways.

In sum, *Front Mission* fails to maintain science fictional plausibility in its contradictory gameplay, which further weakens its critique. *Ace Combat* fails to depart from reality far enough to provide a science fictional novum that corresponds to the theoretical potential of its alternative world. In both cases, the combination of narrative and gameplay fails to be science-fictionally plausible. Although contradictions between several elements are common in most games, the next section shows that some titles, more than others, succeed in deploying the science fictional novum more comprehensively than the abovementioned games.

5.4 The Economic Nightmare

*Armored Core* (hereafter *AC*) is a long-lasting series of third-person mecha action games. Its world is ruled by global companies rather than nations or elected political entities. The world’s history varies within the series, but in most cases, the games present a post-apocalyptic present in the aftermath of a world-wide (nuclear) war. This major event changed the world’s power balance in favour of

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86 This event is referred to as the “Great Destruction (daihakai)” in the PSX and PS2 titles (from *AC* released in 1997 to *AC: Last Raven* released in 2005), and as the “National Dismantlement War” in the PS3 titles (since the 2006 release of *AC4*). The Japanese Wikipedia entry for *daihakai* (Wikipedia 2013f) refers to three different versions of this event in the series. In *AC4* and *AC for Answer*, the Great Destruction is replaced by a “National Dismantlement War” waged by the leading companies in a situation where the national governments are unable to deal with the problems of overpopulation and the
the technology companies involved in these wars, which hold all political power ever since. Already through its setting, the AC series features a direct critique of (neo-liberal) capitalism and ecological destruction in its dystopic future. As the Japanese Wikipedia entry on the “Great Destruction”—or “Grand Slam,” as the entry calls it—summarizes it for the first titles, its background is the distortion of the maximally grown liberal economy. Rapid increase of slums and environmental pollution in the industrialized countries are paralleled by their fraud against the developing countries, disguised as developmental aid. An irrecoverable gap of economic inequality, population growth, as well as environmental damage and food shortage caused by the destruction of nature, resulted in distrust in the governments’ abilities to run the countries. (Wikipedia 2013f, my translation)

Beyond a narrative depiction of the consequences such world and its inhabitants are facing, the series puts the player in the role of a mercenary tasked with biological and economic survival. During the course of the game, the player is offered numerous contracts by diverse employers, first and foremost the major companies. These missions require sophisticated machinery and advanced weapons technology. Piloting a mecha called “Armored Core,” the player has to fight enemy mecha and other deadly war machines, both manned and unmanned. The money earned from these contracts can be used to purchase new parts for one’s own machine.

With its myriad parts and many interrelated layers of customization, the AC series is arguably one of the most complex examples of mecha customization. Figure 7 hints at the complexity of the Armored Core setup. With all its options, the AC upgrade system requires considerable comparing and research in order to be mastered to some extent. Above, I have criticized a similar system in the discussion of the Front Mission series or the Gundam strategy rpgs. In all cases, mecha are not only an important element of the game mechanic, but also function as a customizable object of fascination, targeting an audience enthusiastic about (war) machines and technologically savvy. Example 5.5 shows that AC shares such technology fetish, arguably propelling it to new heights by offering elaborate rise of terrorism and anarchy (Wikipedia 2013c). Whereas this later change can easily be explained by a different world setting, earlier games confused their players due to different versions of the Great Destruction (Wikipedia 2013b). Released after AC for Answer, AC V does not continue the storyline of the earlier titles, but can be considered as a standalone project in terms of its narrative and world, and will not be focused on in the following section (Wikipedia 2013d).
designs and various ways of admiring the machine, whether as 3D models or in the opening video sequences.

Figure 7. Customization in AC.

Yet, whereas other games do not connect this dominant role of technology and customization directly to their science fictional world, the upgrade system in AC is a crucial element for conveying the series’ dark vision of an economically dominated future. The relation between both elements is achieved by increasing the definiteness of one’s actions in several interrelated ways. Among them, the payment system can arguably be said to be the most important. In AC, the player is rewarded for the actual performance during the missions, which he or she can fail to accomplish without having to start all over again. Figure 8 indicates that successful and efficient completion raises the income considerably, whereas poor and inefficient use of weapons, damage to the Armored Core, or failure to meet...
the objectives lowers the reward and may even result in minus balance, since ammunition and repairs have to be paid in any case. Losing the ability to upgrade the mecha is a major problem, as missions do not get easier.

![Mission Report](image)

Figure 8. Two results for the same mission in Armored Core for Answer (l, m), followed by the choice to redo or save permanently (r).

The rewards earned in a mission are linked to the player’s performance in other series like Front Mission or Ace Combat as well. However, the absolute judgment in AC is further elevated by the games’ treatment of the saving function. What distinguishes titles like AC4 is that they only allow for saving the entire status upon leaving the game, thereby forcing the player to accept less successful missions or revert to the frustrating method of restarting the entire game and going through the loading process after each suboptimal performance.87 Albeit to a lesser degree, such an experience is also part of earlier games such as AC2. Here, successful completion, while in itself a considerable achievement for less experienced players like myself (see below), may, depending on the actual performance, not return sufficient revenues for the necessary upgrades, since ammunition and repair costs are generally very high.

Another way of conveying their dystopic message is the high difficulty these games display. The Armored Core series is not aimed at casual gamers, but targets hardcore fans with sophisticated data analysis and tactical skills, as well as a good hand-eye coordination. These requirements complicate the struggle for survival as a mercenary substantially. Recent titles like AC Nexus or the PS3 games AC4 and

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87 In other titles, like AC for Answer, the player can choose to redo a mission based on the results, accept his or her performance, or cancel the whole procedure, returning to the pre-mission state. On the one hand, this effectively weakens the absoluteness of one’s performance. On the other hand, it confronts the player with a difficult choice, since the earlier results are erased when opting for retrial.
AC for Answer feature a complex set of commands, which makes use of almost the entire range of controller functions. For me as a player used to recent first-person and third-person shooters, the earlier AC2 controls provided an even more demanding challenge, because it neither makes use of the analogue sticks, nor offers a key assignment system. With only two key mapping options left, the player is forced to master the mecha in a pre-determined, from my perspective counterintuitive way. Offering a frustrating initial playing experience, this limitation and awkwardness of the controls, however, points to the role controls play in the experience of gameplay in general, and the control over technology and mecha in particular.88

Together, these elements support and amplify the experience of a world dominated by companies and war technology. By deploying the nova of economic dominance and mecha technology in multiple elements of narrative, game system, and gameplay, the AC series manages to offer an involving experience of survival in a world which has turned into a freelance battlefield. It may not surprise the reader that some of the skills these games require are familiar from the earlier analysis of acceleration and information density in Gundam, in the context of which I have discussed them as an uncreative survival strategies.89 The AC series radicalizes this tendency almost beyond recognition, confronting the player with a dystopic totality in which biological survival—to the extent to which this category exists in videogames with their saving and retry options—is directly linked to economic survival and the skills necessary to prevail in battle.

Whereas the lack of narrative context to the missions in many Gundam games was perceived as a failure, AC—which, by the way, does feature a vague overarching narrative—embeds this lack convincingly into its world view. After all, one does not choose to accept contracts due to their political motivation, but because they are lucrative and ensure survival. Interestingly, AC for Answer offers a choice

88 From a contemporary perspective grounded in an ever more realistic and intuitive experience of technological control, technical (and thereby often sensual) restrictions and limitations in titles like AC2 or early PSX Gundam games such as Mobile Suit Gundam (1996) and Gyakushū no Shā [Char's Counterattack] (1998), can offer a deeply disruptive, alienating experience of a 'lack of control' over the machine.

89 Interestingly, AC offers the player the choice not to accept a mission or to abort it. AC for Answer is well known for requiring of the player nothing more than a successful completion of the final two missions—offering enough reward for missions aborted midway to upgrade the Armored Core sufficiently. Here, the game departs or abstracts from its economic logic, because it is conceivable that companies aiming towards profit and efficiency would not hire an unreliable mercenary repeatedly.
between several companies the player can join as a hired mercenary, including an independent faction, as shown in Figure 9.

“The world’s largest corporation. It primarily operates as a defense contractor. Their craft proudly display military colors and feature excellent defense and heavy weaponry.”

“A military corporation with political might on their side. They tend to keep their distance from both GA and the Interior. Their craft are standard, highly maneuverable Rosenthal machines.”

“An independent mercenary unaffiliated with any corporation. The only available craft is an older Rayleonard model, built for close range combat. Good luck.”

Figure 9. Ideological choices in AC for Answer. Translation taken from Ramza411sb’s (2011) “Interactive Let’s Play Armored Core: For Answer.”

At first glance, this might suggest some space for morally or ideologically driven decisions. However, betraying any such expectations, ideology is reduced to choices between different machines.90 The general tendency of the series suggests that

90 This is most aptly expressed in the following section of a walkthrough by Acid Losvaize (2009, ACFA03, errors in the original): “When you start the game, will be prompted about some options, and finally about your sponsoring company. Whatever you choose, it won’t affect storyline, just your initial gear and parts that will be in the shop at first. When I begun the game, of course chosen independent type, but I think it’s better to take Interior Union since Tellus legs and core are premium quality, and you will be able to buy two Altair by
this is not a flaw in the game design, but may well be read as a way of conveying the final consequence of this world: the irrelevance of ideology in the everyday struggle of the mercenary to survive the economic nightmare.

5.5 Conclusions
This chapter examined several major tendencies in the field of relevant science fictional videogames defined in the last chapter. It identified some of the ways in which mecha are deployed in different series, ranging from means of addressing franchise fans or a technology-savvy audience attracted to war machinery to proper nova in the sf sense, which are effective not only visually but also in the gameplay rules and experience. The fact that these tendencies cannot be separated clearly makes the mecha an ambivalent device in Japanese sf games.

The analysis suggests that the most dominant franchises on the market are not necessarily the most promising from a political point of view. As adaptations, the *Gundam* games feature a deconstructive tendency in the context of the adapted universe and offer the player a new perspective on and experience of their universe. However, in most cases, they remain self-referential and are dominated by skinning practices—a tendency even stronger in hybrids like *Gundam Musô* or crossover series like *A.C.E.* The review of adaptations leads to the conclusion that a random selection of database elements does not suffice to generate disruptive conflicts. These results make me wonder if ‘databasification’ can offer the “piquancy of surprise” and “change” at all, which Hutcheon (2006, 4) regards as major potential of adaptations. As games in their own right, the analyzed *Gundam* titles have proven to be ambiguous cases, perpetuating the contemporary conditions on the one hand, and offering strategies for survival on the other. Overall, they remain repetitive and do not offer genuine alternatives or novel strategies of resistance.

At the same time, the above sections emphasize the importance of the novum, highlighting different ways in which it is deployed. Independent series like *Front Mission, Ace Combat* or *Armored Core* offer the player an alternative world one cannot but call dystopic. In all cases, the dark tenor is that the effort made towards selling one of the crappy samsara or medusa weapons. I strongly recommend you to do this. Drawback of choosing Interior instead independent… you are losing blade dragonslayer (I mean, you don’t have it and can not buy blades until later in the game), that is quite useful to kill AF’s. Besides, AALIYAH gear is more expensive than TELLUS, so economically you lose choosing this last one. Anyways, for me is best to have two Altair from the first mission.”
living together in peace cannot prevent a fiercely fought global war about resources and power. Yet, *Front Mission* and *Ace Combat* proved to stop short of deploying a novum in their gameplay, restricting it—and with it their political message—to the conventional narrative layer. This does not make their universes as such less science-fictional or their gameplay less enjoyable, but weakens their overall appeal as sf games because it leads to implausible contradictions rather than plausible disruptive conflicts, thus working counterproductively to the critical elements displayed in the story or setting.

An example of a more encompassing deployment of the novum was found in the sophisticated dystopia of the *Armored Core* series, which does not only transfer the player into a post-apocalyptic world, but reflects and amplifies this setting in its gameplay and rule set, thus offering a total, compelling and frightening experience of life under extreme conditions. This finding is supportive of Suvin’s (1982, 6) claim that in the most effective or optimal sf,

> a sufficiently large number of precisely aimed and compatible details draw out a sufficiently full range of logical implications from the central S-F novum und thus suggest a coherent universe with overall relationships that are—at least in respect of the thematic and semantic field associated with the novum—significantly different from the relationships assumed by the text’s addressees.

In this sense, a preliminary conclusion that informs the consecutive analysis is that the computopic might be politically most potent where games mobilize a wide spectrum of their expressive elements or combine these elements in intriguing ways. In the light of the strong dystopic tendency found in the first exploration, a major question for the following chapters is whether games can only function as critical and disturbing devices, because their logic is so strongly interwoven with our present that they remain bound to it, or whether they also offer disruptive and more promising visions, which point to directions of possible systemic alternatives. To show that this is the case, the chapters of part III focus on three areas of computopic expression, namely narrative, representation, and rules, which are particularly apt to address the political dimension of time, aesthetics, and action in distinct and potentially radical ways. The analysis concentrates on titles, which explicitly make these themes a central subject of the gameplay and deploy their science fictional nova on multiple aspects of their computopic universe.