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Fabian Schäfer

East-Asian Institute
University of Leipzig

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“Ludic Philosophy”: Subjectivity, choice and virtual death in digital media

Fabian Schäfer

Abstract

Time, the irrevocability of choice and commitment as well as the finality of death are central premises in modern moral and political thinking. This irreversibility is understood to reflect something about the organism, and something about the world. As culture comes to be mediated more and more by digital architectures in which time can be skipped, reversed, and begun again, it becomes important to revisit these premises. This paper seeks to bring together thinkers across nations and across disciplines to organize the question of time in the digital age. In particular the relationship between human beings and the virtual/digital world of knowledge databases and online video games.

Keywords:

Animalization, Azuma Hiroki, Walter Benjamin, databases, digital games, digital media, Martin Heidegger, the Internet, otaku, subjectivity, video games

Introduction

To this day, philosophy still basically remains a *Euro-American* and *logocentric* project. It restricted itself geographically and culturally to thought by Western, male thinkers, stored in written language. Against the background of a widening of this philosophical canonization around the end of the Cold War (the collapse of the “Grande Narratives” proposed by postmodern thinkers), this article aims to frame an intervention into this formation of Western philosophy, through examining the simultaneous challenges of “non-European” thought, and thought that is presented by means of popular “non-linear” cultural forms, particularly the digital game.

There are two key stages in this intervention. First, “Western” philosophy is contextualized in relation to contemporary thought in Japan (primarily through a discussion of the work of Azuma Hiroki) in order to overcome the geopolitical dichotomy between a hegemonic (universalistic) Western philosophy and a marginalized non-Western philosophy. Second, digital games are acknowledged as a medium that contributes to philosophical discourse by refiguring given philosophical concepts based on its original materiality.¹ I suggest that this offers a possibility to overcome the logocentrism of philosophy already criticized by thinkers like French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1976). This article will discuss to what extent the philosophical concepts inherent of time and death can be experienced (or reflected upon) in a “playful” way through the act of playing these games. This article will not analyze the philosophical thought represented in the narration of games, rather it will focus on the actions of the player. It is the basic assumption of this article that playing digital games is an essentially different experience than watching a linear movie, because players actively participate (haptically and cognitively) in the shape that a game assumes. This mode of media use, which is based on the materiality of digital media, cannot be grasped simply by the idea of an “active audience” (see Galloway, 2006, p. 3). Digital game players both produce and consume their own experience; and many of the

decisions and actions made by a player in a game touch upon ethical, moral, or philosophical issues. I will call this new form of philosophizing based on the interactions between players and digital games *ludic philosophy*.

This approach is necessary and important in order to align contemporary philosophy to the most recent technological developments in the field of digital media; not in the sense of a philosophy of digital games or media in general, but as a new form of *philosophizing* corresponding to these recent developments. To include digital games into the scope of philosophy acknowledges that it is necessary to rethink the meaning of academic philosophy in general. In order to prevent philosophy from losing its contact to the contemporary mediated nature of the world, it is necessary for researchers and philosophers to accept that a *new media literacy* is required to understand the grammar and algorithmic logic underlying digital game (see Galloway, 2006). Moreover, it means to acknowledge that some of the most important cultural producers (philosophers?) of digital media are of the gamer generation (see also Wark, 2007).

This article works through this two stage intervention in the following manner: the first section, examines "interactivity", from a Heideggerian perspective, using the example of the Internet and HTML; the second section introduces ludic philosophy by examining the possibilities of subjectivity in the use of digital games, and how play may allow users to experience and reflect on concepts such as "control"/"freedom," "time"/"space" and "existence"/"death"; while the third, and final, section describes modes of intervention and deconstruction into the structure of digital media in terms of another mode of user subjectivity from the perspective of Japanese cultural critic Azuma Hiroki's approach to digital cultures and its users.

Internet: interactivity, choice, and *fallenness*

It is commonly agreed that the intellectual basis for the interactivity of the Internet was established by American scientist Vannevar Bush. In an article entitled "As We May Think" published in *The Atlantic* shortly after the end of WWII, Bush predicted that in the future 'wholly new forms of encyclopedias will appear, ready made with a mesh of associative trails running through them'. The idea behind the *Memex* (short for memory extender) machine envisaged by Bush (1945) was that:

...[t]he human mind [...] operates by association. With one item in its grasp, it snaps instantly to the next that is suggested by the association of thoughts, in accordance with some intricate web of trails carried by the cells of the brain.

Even though the *Memex* was never realized, Bush's article influenced the development of hypertext theory, such as that established by philosopher and sociologist Ted Nelson (who is also credited with first use of the term "hypertext"). Nelson's (1960) project *Xanadu*, which was basically a universal knowledge management system, pre-empted the development of the World Wide Web by 25 years. The aim of Nelson's project was to invent a word processor capable of storing multiple versions of documents and to facilitate non-sequential writing, in which the reader could choose his or her own path through an electronic document.

However, it remains questionable how the interactivity of hypertext impacts on its users and how they cope with the simultaneous existence and accessibility of documents or websites. According to German information scientist Rainer Kuhlen (1991, p.182): '...[h]ypertext seems to be cognitively reasonable on the supposition that the brain organizes knowledge [...] in cross-linked, topological, and non-linear structures'; thus, 'knowledge absorption based on comparable organizational patterns, as

it is given with hypertext, might be more efficient than accumulation via the “detour” of linear forms of presentation’. However, Kuhlen (1991, p.56) insists that: ‘the integration of two networks, especially if they are polyhierarchically structured, is more difficult to integrate than a linear structure into an existing network’.²

The problems of the integration of linear and networked knowledge structures described by Kuhlen are also central to the most recent popular debates on the dangers and possibilities of the Internet. In August 2008, the German news magazine *Der Spiegel* and the American journal *The Atlantic* both published cover stories on the dangers of Internet-based communication and knowledge. The two magazines posed the question if ‘Google’ (*The Atlantic*) or, more generally, ‘the Internet’ (*Der Spiegel*) ‘is Making us Stupid?’ The tone of the stories is ambivalent: similar to the introduction of other new communication technologies such as radio broadcasting or television in the past, the discourse splits into two camps of Internet critics and Internet enthusiasts. The enthusiasts argue that the Internet is leading to the occurrence of new simultaneous modes of perception, a democratization of knowledge, and an unprecedented creativity of its users (see for example: Jenkins, 2006a). While the critics focus on: the loss of critical reason or the capacity for remembering, rising attention deficit, the loss of a common culture existing through the reading of books, and intellectual passivity. Furthermore, the critical camp often psychopathologizes the “effects” of the use of the Internet, arguing that spending “too much” time on the Internet - searching through a cornucopia of texts, videos or music or writing emails and instant messages - can “cause” social behavioral disorders such as an anti-social attitude or an unwillingness to communicate.

Besides this panic mongering and exaggerated psychopathologization of Internet users, it is the “effects” of the Internet on cognitive abilities and reading capability that Internet critics find particularly unsettling. In his editorial at the *The Atlantic*, American writer Nicholas Carr complains that the persistent use of the Internet is already having an influence on his capacity for concentration and contemplation. According to Carr, he was ‘once (...) a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now [he] zip[s] along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski’ (Carr, 2008). Commonly it is “interactivity” it self that is deemed to have this ‘Jet Ski’ effect on our cognition.

The concern that Carr indicates stems from the inner restlessness that users feel when they are faced with the decision between two or more possibilities. This restlessness complicates the seamless absorption of knowledge by means of interactive digital media. Hyper-links might be compared to junctions or options, or possibilities on which *Dasein* can project itself. In this sense, the networked structure of the Internet might thus be described as a miniature of the possibilities-for-Being (*Seinkönnen*) of *Dasein*. As in “real” life, deciding in favor of one possibility necessarily means to negate others. According to Heidegger (1993 /1927):

Dasein is its basis existently (*existierend*) – that is, in such a manner that it understands (*verstehen*) itself in terms of possibilities (*Möglichkeiten*) (...). But this implies that in having a potentiality-for-Being (*seinkönnend*) it always stands in one possibility or another: it constantly is *not* other possibilities, and it has waived these in its existential projection (*existentieller Entwurf*). Not only is the projection, as one that has been thrown, determined by the nullity of Being-a-basis (*Nichtigkeit des Grundseins*); as projection it is itself essentially null (*nichtig*) (p. 285).

Nevertheless, it is only in what Heidegger (1993/1927) called the ‘authentic’ (*eigentlich*) mode of Being (*Seinsweise*) (p. 42) that *Dasein* can “choose” [or] win itself and thereby

'be' itself (*Selbstsein, Being-one's-Self*) through an existential projection in the choice of 'its ownmost possibilities' (p. 68). Most of the times, Heidegger admits, the *Dasein* is determined by the given possibilities and is thus not situated in the mode of authenticity (*Eigentlichkeit*) but in one of "fallenness" (*Verfallenheit*).

The possibility of 'falling' seems to be relatively high in the case of the interlinked structure of the Internet – or other databases – if compared to the reading of a linear structured book. This 'fallenness' can assume two forms – 'distraction' and 'procrastination' in the case of the Internet. Regarding the former, re-reading Walter Benjamin's well-known essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility* (2002/1936) as an ontological inquiry of new modes of media reception appears to be valuable. Benjamin (2002/1936), who anticipated McLuhan's perception that media are not just passive channels of information but also influence the ways we perceive things transmitted through the media, observes that:

Just as the entire mode of existence of human collectives changes over long historical periods, so too does their mode of perception. The way in which human perception is organized – the medium in which it occurs – is conditioned not only by nature but by history (p. 104, original emphasis).

I suggest that this observation is particularly appropriate for contemporary use of the Internet.

"Surfing" the Internet can be described as what Benjamin termed 'reception in distraction' (*Rezeption in der Zerstreuung*) (Benjamin, 2002/1936, p. 120). This mode of perception, according to Benjamin, is based on the 'tactile [*taktisch*] quality' of the object of perception—which was, in Benjamin's case, movies and photographs (Benjamin 2002/1936: 119). The tactility of digital media is emphasized by the interactivity of the Internet or databases. As Nicholas Carr (2008), asserted in his cover story of *The Atlantic*, hyperlinks, '[u]nlike footnotes... ..don't merely point to related works; they propel you toward them' (Carr, 2008). The perception of the Internet is, to use the words of Benjamin, one of 'tactile reception' (*taktile Rezeption*) that is based on 'habit' rather than on 'attention' (Benjamin 2002/1936: 120). To Heidegger, who used the term 'distraction' (*Zerstreuung*) in a comparable way, distraction is based on 'curiosity' (*Neugier*), a mode of fallenness. Other than *Verstehen* (understanding) as the self-projection of the being on its ownmost possibilities, curiosity is merely based on 'seeing' (*Sehen*). In this mode of being, 'Dasein seeks what is far away simply in order to bring it close to itself in the way it looks. Dasein lets itself to be taken along [mitnehmen] solely by the looks of the world' (Heidegger 1993 [1927], p. 216).

The dangers of 'fallen' or 'distracted' ways of Internet use can be substantiated by Rowlands and Nicholas' (2008) study of online research habits. Over the course of five years they analyzed the behavior of visitors to two popular research sites – one operated by the British Library and one by a U.K. educational consortium – that provide access to journal articles, e-books, and other sources of written information. The results of their research showed that people using the sites exhibited a kind of skimming activity, hopping from one source to another and rarely returning to any source they had already visited (Rowlands and Nicholas 2008). Users typically read only one or two pages of an article or book before they would jump to another site. Sometimes they saved a long article, but there's no evidence that they ever went back and actually read it. Despite users potentially having the possibility to jump back to an earlier link and choose a different alternative, they only rarely make use of that possibility. The annihilation of the linear and non-contemporaneous time-space

continuum established by the non-determined structure of the Internet does not overcome the restricted cognitive abilities of human beings.

The reversibility and choice associated with digital media appears to sit rather ambiguously in relation to human cognition. Apparently, while many Internet users react to links as “possibilities” in Heidegger’s sense, there is also a tendency towards ‘Squirreling’, a process of coping with the flood of information provided by the Internet by the creation of personalized individual databases of the information retrieved from larger databases (Rowlands and Nicholas, 2008). In medical terms, this fetishization of knowledge may be described as procrastination. Procrastination, a condition that some psychologists advocate therapy for, is characterized by deferment of actions or tasks to a later time, may result in stress, a sense of guilt, the loss of personal productivity, the creation of crisis and the disapproval of others for not fulfilling one’s responsibilities or commitments. Not only that this undone work seems to leave traces in our subconsciousness, it also does harm to our computers because we clutter up our hard disks – often in a very unorganized way – with downloaded and yet unread texts.

However, it is important to add here that even Heidegger’s or Benjamin’s perspective on distracted or habitualized perception is not totally pessimistic. In fact, they agree that curiosity and tactile apperception aren’t necessarily something that should be condemned from the outset. According to Heidegger, the temporality (*Zeitlichkeit*) of curiosity, which is non-‘anticipatory’ (namely ‘non-self-projecting’) and thus merely ‘awaiting’ (*gewärtigend*), ‘has its natural justification [...] [and] belongs to the everyday kind of being of Da-Sein and to the understanding of being initially prevalent’ (Heidegger, 1993/1927, p. 478). Similarly, Benjamin (2002/1936, p. 120) asserts that perception in a state of distraction ‘under certain circumstances... . . . acquires canonical value’. Since:

the tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at historical turning points cannot be performed solely by optical means – that is, by way of contemplation. They are mastered gradually – taking their cue from tactile reception – through habit (Benjamin 2002/1936, p. 120, original emphasis).

Obviously, if applied to the cognition of the interactive structure of the Internet, Heidegger’s and Benjamin’s perspective refers to two ways of dealing with digital and interlinked texts. The first is the “authentic” *Seinsweise* of understanding and contemplation. This is a mode of reception that – in Bolter’s (1991, p. 167) words, looks ‘*through* the text’ and thus grasps and understands the meaning of the narration “behind” the text. the second is a “fallen” mode, in which the user has to ‘look *at* the text, as a series of possibilities [or links, F.S.] that he or she (...) can activate’ (Bolter 1991: 167). This division establishes two *modes* of usage—one being active and “authentic” and one being passive and “in-authentic”—rather than two *strategies* of dealing with digital, networked information.

It is important to acknowledge that the distinct strategies of explorative browsing and the purposeful search both contain possibilities for ‘authentic’ and ‘in-authentic’ modes of use. While the users’, in Heidegger’s words, ‘ownmost projection’ may guide the purposeful search; it is also necessary to be open to the possibilities provided by the structures of interactive digital media. This is because the versatility and complexity of the Internet also has its positive side, sometimes called the *serendipity effect*. In general, serendipity refers to an unintended, fortunate, but accidental discovery. The Internet, with its many possibilities and multifold layers emphasizes the emergent possibilities of this form of information retrieval. This form of ‘browsing’ large

amounts of data is only possible through the haptic and tactile perception described by Walter Benjamin and is one important aspect of digital media literacy.

“Ludic philosophy”: subjectivity, irreversibility of choice and virtual death in digital games

Just like hypertext has to be read by activating links, digital games must be played in order to “function” as a medium.³ Alexander R. Galloway (2006, p. 2), asserts that: ‘[w]ithout the active participation of players and machines, digital games exist only as static computer code. Digital games come into being when the machine is powered up and the software is executed; they exist when enacted’. Digital games are an ‘action-based’ media (Galloway 2006, p. 2). To Galloway (2006, p. 3), it is impossible to grasp the materiality of digital games through concepts like ‘interactivity’ or ‘active audiences’. Unlike traditional media such as books, television, or radio, digital games are distinct as they have a: ‘materiality [that] moves and restructures itself’ (Galloway, 2006, p. 3). Playing a game, to Galloway, is a combination of mutual *diegetic* and *non-diegetic actions* executed either by the *machine* (video game) or the *operator* (player) (Galloway, 2006, pp. 6-8). This differentiation by Galloway not only constructively approaches the schism between narratology and ludology, it also allows for a reconsideration of the philosophical nature of digital games.⁴

Ian Bogost (2006) argues that digital games:

require critical interpretation to mediate our experience of the simulation, to ground it in a set of coherent and expressive values, responses, or understandings that constitute effects of the work. [...] This is the place where rules can be grasped, where instantiated code enters the material world via human player’s faculty of reason’ (p. 99).

Bogost defines digital game simulations as ‘the gap between the rule-based representation of a source system and a user’s subjectivity’ (Bogost, 2006, p. 107). It is the “subjective” achievement of the user to create *mental models* (in the case of abstract simulations such as economic simulations) or *cognitive maps* (in the case of spatial and concrete games such as first-person shooters), ‘that converge on an interpretation based on what the simulation *includes* and what it *excludes*’ (Bogost, 2006, p. 104; original emphasis). Bogost concludes that it is the ‘gap’, the things left out by the simulation based on the reduction of complexity that provides leeway for the users’ individual subjectivities. It is exactly this leeway that is of interest here with regard to what I have tentatively called *ludic philosophy*.⁵

Subjectivity, freedom, control, and agency are central concepts of philosophy and critical theory. Against the background of the leeway given by digital games described above, it is necessary to ask that if in addition to offering subject positions, the experience of subjectivity in digital games is *also reflected philosophically* by the players during the course of play. Galloway explains the particular relation of subjectivity and digital games by comparing the first-person perspective in games with the first-person perspective in cinema. He argues that:

while the mass media of film, literature, television, and so on continue to engage in various debates around representation, textuality, and *subjectivity*, there has emerged in recent years a whole new medium, computers and in particular video games, whose foundation is not in looking and reading but in the instigation of material change through *action* (Galloway, 2006, p 4; original emphasis).

If one understands subjectivity or identity as the ‘a *game* that ought to be *played* against difference’ (Hall, 2007, p. 82; original emphasis), the potential of digital games in relation to questions of subjectivity and its philosophical reflection becomes more clear. Similar to the perspective of Jacques Derrida (1996), who argues that because the perceiving subject’s mental state is constantly in a state of flux, and differs from one re-reading of texts to the next, the meaning of language is thus not essential but constantly temporally deferred, the simulation of a digital game creates a “gap” between virtual reality and reality, leaving a leeway for subjectivity (see also Bogost, 2006).

This becomes particularly obvious in the case of first-person shooters. In cinema first-person perspectives are aesthetically marginalized, used mainly ‘to effect a sense of alienation, otherness, detachment, or fear’ (Galloway, 2006, p. 56). However:

with the advent of video games, a new set of possibilities were opened up for the subjective shot. In games the first-person perspective is not marginalized but instead is commonly used to achieve an intuitive sense of affective motion. [...] Where film uses the subjective shot to represent a problem with identification, games use the subjective shot to *create* identification. While film has thus far used the subjective shot as a corrective to break through and destroy certain stabilizing elements in the film apparatus, games use the subjective shot to facilitate an active subject position that enables and facilitates the gamic apparatus (Galloway, 2006, pp. 68-69)

Similar to the experience of subjectivity of first-person shooters which is rather based on motion and a ‘*gamic vision* [that] *requires fully rendered, actionable space*’ (Galloway, 2006:,p. 63; original emphasis) generating a haptic and tactile experience of this space, the experience and reflection of the philosophical experience of control (lack of freedom) is based more on the non-diegetic than the diegetic elements of game play.

In his subsequent discussion of *Civilization III* (Firaxis Games 2001), Galloway (2006: 85-106), illustrates how these non-diegetic elements of digital games are experienced. Instead of focusing on the hidden ideologies of digital games, Galloway analyzes the manipulation of parameters in construction and management simulations (CMS) in *Civilization* or the command of hot keys of the controller in martial arts games such as the *Tekken* series (Namco 1994-) as an allegory (not mere representation) of the idea of *control* in modern control societies. Similarly, Bogost (2006: 154) describes the *Grand Theft Auto* (GTA) series (DMA Design/Rockstar North 1997-), as a game that: ‘does not just provide several different styles of gameplay, it also allows free-form transitions between those play styles’ and allows ‘the player [to] make[s] a conscious and rational decision to follow one path instead of another’, as the experience of *freedom*. Thus, Bogost (2006: 169) concludes, ‘we should be less inclined to condemn works like GTA for their brutality than to try to evolve the core problem at present: how to understand and refine [...] our possible action so we can interrogate and improve the system of human experience’.

Similar to the experience of freedom and control in video games, it is also the experience of irreversible choice (and it’s relationship to time) that has been totally disregarded as an important factor for the creation of simulations. *Counter-Strike* (Valve Software 2000), a popular online and multiplayer LAN tactical first-person shooter, can explain another philosophical moment inherent to digital games. Unlike the undetermined structure of webpages that created a non-linear and reversible experience of time, decisions in online-videogames are necessarily real-time decisions. Contrary to the traditional linear structure of written language that allows the reader to jump back to

earlier points of the text, creating a repetition of the past, decisions made on the Internet are necessarily real-time decisions. Whereas one is able to pause or save a game in regular digital games, in online-games or even chat forums this is impossible. Once a game has started or a message is posted, it is impossible to jump back to an earlier point on the linear time axis since all information is sent instantly to all other participants of a game or a chat forum.

On a narrative level, *Counter-Strike* attempts to realistically simulate the combat between a group of terrorists and counter-terrorist team. Similar to other first-person shooter games, each team attempts to complete their mission objective and/or eliminate the opposing team. However, one important feature distinguishes this game from other games of this genre, namely that killed players are not able to “respawn” (come alive again), but turn into “spectators” for the remaining time of the round. Originally, it was the aim of the developers to encourage strategic gaming among the players of each of the two groups. This feature is however, a common point of criticism from among the games’ players, because it causes long waiting periods for eliminated players. However, I suggest that this is also one of the most important reasons behind the popularity of *Counter-Strike*, because in this case *virtual death* takes on a higher stakes than is usually found in digital games on the first-person shooter genre. Death is much more *real* because it is irreversible (at least for the duration of a single round).

Heidegger described this anticipation of death as the authentic temporality of *Dasein*. On opposition to the ordinary representation of time – which is characterized as ‘an endless, irreversible sequence of “nows” which passes away’ (Heidegger 1993/1927, p. 478) – he proposed a dimensional conception of time. This conception encapsulates the existential and basic structure of temporality as a double movement. The first movement is the anticipation (*Vorlaufen*) into its future (*Zu-kunft*). The second movement consists of a ‘coming back understandingly to one’s ownmost ‘being’ [“Gewesen”]’ (Heidegger 1993/1927, p. 373). *Dasein* exists through the authentic projection on its ownmost possibilities. According to Heidegger, it is anxiety (*Angst*), not of something that is in the world, but of the being-in-the-world of *Dasein*. It is only in this state of anxiety that *Dasein* is projected upon itself and is liberated from domination, being free to be itself. This however, presents *Dasein* to its own finitude and nullity by experiencing itself as a “being-toward-death” (*Sein zum Tode*) (Heidegger 1993/1927, pp. 304-312). Put differently, being-toward-death is not an orientation that brings *Dasein* closer to its physical end, in terms of clinical death, but is rather a way of being. It is the anticipation of one’s death that brings one into its authentic mode of being. If applied to the particular character of online-games, what makes the experience of online digital games so “real” or “authentic”, is not so much the technical perfection of the simulation of three-dimensional space, sound, or haptic sensation, but rather the anticipation (and in some instances irreversibility) of one’s death and thus the experience of a dimensional structure of time. Based on this Heideggerian interpretation, I suggest that online-games are in fact more than just “games”. Unlike typical games, commonly conceptualized as non-productive entertainment, that are primarily played for escapist purposes, online-games like *Counter-Strike* simulate the most feared, and at the same time existential, feature of human life: mortality.

Media literacy, deconstruction, and *otaku*

With regard to “fallenness” of *Dasein* to a tactile and habitualized information seeking behavior in the digital era or the behavior exhibited when playing digital games, it is valuable to take into account the contemporary philosophical discourse on the phenomenon of *otaku* culture in Japan, since much of the public debate on the positive

and negative sides of the Internet or digital games parallels the discourse on *otaku* culture in Japan. Previous discourses on *otaku*—a Japanese term that refers to people with obsessive interests in various Japanese subcultures, particularly manga, anime, science fiction, or digital games—usually psychopathologized the *otaku* as people being anti-social, uncommunicative, self-absorbed and even perverted, or tried to understand the phenomenon psychoanalytically.⁶ However, this article will focus on the work of Azuma Hiroki (2001), an important Japanese cultural critic who analyzed the *otaku* from the perspective of their pioneering role in the so-called “information society”.⁷

In his book *Dōbutsuka suru posutomodan: Otaku kara mita Nihon shakai* (2001, *Animalizing Postmodern: Japanese Society as Seen from the Perspective of Otaku*), Azuma Hiroki considers the *otaku* phenomenon a new peculiarly Japanese inflection ‘of the global trend of postmodernization’ (Azuma 2001, p. 19).⁸ With reference to Kojève’s (1969) neo-Hegelian distinction between two forms of ‘post-historical existence’—the ‘animalization’ of American society based on consumerism and the highly formalized and aestheticized ‘snobbism’ of the Japanese—Azuma asserts that *otaku* culture consists of a ‘two-tiered’ (*nijū-ka*) mode of consumption that reflects the two-layered structure of the postmodern itself (Azuma 2001, pp. 76-78).⁹ In addition to the two layers of the modern world-image—the ‘depth’ of ‘grand narratives’ (namely ideals, ideology) and a ‘surface’ of many ‘small narratives’—Azuma claims that the latter were replaced by a ‘grand database’ in the postmodern world-image (*sekaijō*). Whereas the modern era formed a structure in which a single grand narrative/ideal controlled the diverse small narratives and cultural and social criticism consisted in analyzing grand narratives as reflected within various small narratives, in the postmodern, people may grasp any number of small world-images (Azuma 2001, pp 50-54).

Azuma claims that one can identify two ways of how the *otaku* deal with this new world-image. He calls one the “animalesque” (*dōbutsuteki*) side of database consumption; that is the solitude and passive consumption of the many small narratives of digital games, anime, or manga that are merely based on “combinations” (*kumiwase*) of self-referential elements from the grand database. Moreover, database consumption also has a second, an active or “humanesque” (*ningen-teki*) side, because *otaku* actively intervene in received commodities by breaking down the narratives into their compounds (as for digital games these are screenplay, character, background or for manga it is the single “sensitive elements” (*moe yōso*) that characters are composed of), and thereby get access to the database that lies in the “depth” behind the small narrations and “recreate” (*niji sōsaku*) from it their own narrations or pictures. It is this “double structure” (*nisō kōjō*) of deconstruction and reconstruction that prompts Azuma to interpret the *otaku* culture as a deconstructivist and, thus, subversive form of cultural reception that brings it close to a deconstructivist method in contemporary literary theory that offers a subject position to intervene in existing cultural forms or the discourse.¹⁰ Azuma bases this assertion also on the fact that to the *otaku* it doesn’t matter any longer if the “author” of the small narratives they consume is a professional—“authorized” by one of the big manga or anime publishers—or an amateur who publishes his self-made anime or manga in one of the many fanzines (*dōjinshi*) or the Internet.

One can find similarly deconstructive and reconstructive behavior among the members of the global subcultures gathering around digital games. First-person shooters like *Counter-Strike* are often used to produce *machinima*. *Machinima* is a coinage of the words *machine*, *cinema* and *animation* and refers to 3D-animations created in a real-time virtual environment. Digital games with a powerful 3D-engine are the most inexpensive programs to create *machinima*. Basically, the easiest way to create *machinima* is to let several persons play after a screenplay in a networked multi-player-game. By recording

the screen of one player, her or she acts as cameraman. The other players move their characters within the virtual environment like movie actors. Afterwards, the movie is cut and sometimes even dubbed. Accordingly, the technological requirements to produce machinima are very low because one basically only needs a computer and a game. However, many of the machinima movie productions are much more sophisticated because they make use of modified commercial digital games. These modifications range from mapping and modeling, namely the creation of own virtual environments and characters, to the manipulations of the game software itself, such as lip synchronization, the direct recording of the graphic output as a movie file, or the programming of complete production frameworks (see Lowood 2006, for an expanded discussion of machinima).

Azuma’s argument for the new media literacies of the *otaku* vis-à-vis the initial negative definition of digital media as “fallenness” suggests the necessity of reformulating the question asked by *The Atlantic* and *Der Spiegel*. The appropriate question should not be: Is Google, the Internet, electronic databases, digital games, or the new flood of information in general, making us stupid? As we have seen, besides the “fallen” or “animalized” mode of media use, there is also space for a productive and “humanesque” or subjective way of dealing with digitized information. In terms of education, pedagogies, or media literacies, however, it is necessary to teach the users of these new media the sharp distinction between these two modes. Particularly with regard to the use of digitalized knowledge and the Internet, it will be of particular importance to teach contemplative and analytic reading to a generation of *otaku* and Google users that possesses a highly developed digital literacy but is beginning to lack basic reading and writing skills.

Even more important than teaching the differences between different ways of handling knowledge in the digital age, however, is how we can incorporate Azuma’s positive appraisal of the “double structure” of deconstructive and reconstructive elements of *otaku* culture or *machinima* into existing frameworks of teaching and pedagogy. Let’s take for instance the case of Japan Studies. I think that it has already become a global phenomenon that an increasing number of students enrolling in Japan Studies do so because of an interest in Japanese popular culture and anime or manga in particular (see Jenkins, 2006b). To some of them, calling themselves *otaku* is part of their lifestyle and offers them a subject position and, thus, a self-identity. Many of them, similar to the *otaku* in Japan, spend much of their time on homepages such as fanfiction.net, animexx.de or quizilla.com, reading, commenting and writing stories or uploading pictures that are based on existing anime or manga. In other words, one has to pose the question if it is possible to integrate the existing competences of the new type of students of Japan Studies that are comparable to those attributed to the *otaku*—namely digital literacy, electronic reading skills, active participation in the reconstruction or “bricolage” of media contents published at the Internet or of manga and anime—to the deconstructivist project in the humanities in general.

Conclusion: ludic philosophy, qualitative research and pedagogy

In this article, I have outlined my idea of a “ludic philosophy.” The aim of this new type of philosophy is to overcome the logocentrism and Euro/American-centrism in traditional philosophy. I have tried to show that philosophical concepts inherent to certain games can be experienced and reflected in a “playful” way through the act of playing these games. However, it still has to be proved if the possibility of subjectivity provided by digital games (as action-based media) and deconstructive behaviour described above actually evokes the experience and/or philosophical reflection of the

idea of agency or subjectivity on the side of the player/user. It is necessary to substantiate this assumption on an *empirical* level, since it remains questionable if the leeway or simulation gap given by a digital game is actually “used” in the way proposed in this article. Therefore, it is necessary to study the behavior exhibited by the players during play, which relates to the philosophical concepts mentioned above. Moreover, it might produce even more insights if one compares the behavior of players in Japan with players in Europe or the USA, because the Japanese game market is different from Europe or the USA. In Japan, for instance, first-person shooters like *Counter-Strike* are far less popular than among European and American gamers. Instead, there is a number of genres that do not even exist abroad, such as the many love games (*ren'ai gēmu*), novel games (*noboru gēmu*), and development games (*ikusei gēmu*), many of them having explicit pornographic content.

The findings of these empirical studies will have an impact on the pedagogical discourse as well. The reactions of politicians and the mass media to the rampages at schools in Erfurt (2002), Emsdetten (2006), and Winnenden (2009) in Germany hint at the importance of these topics. Most of the reporting and conservative politicians tried to explain these acts of unintelligible adolescent violence with the consumption of “violent” movies and digital games. *Counter-Strike* was among one of the games frequently mentioned in this respect. If the findings of the empirical analysis of philosophical gaming will show that there is no significant philosophical reflection taking place among players of commercial digital games, these findings may reveal possible frameworks for pedagogical approaches to digital gaming and game design.

Notes

¹ Japan has an unique status in the global game market, as both a major producer of games and also as a particularly strong local market (see Consalvo 2006; Kline, Dyer-Witford and de Peuter 2003).

² All quotes from Kuhlen are translated from the original German by the author.

³ Aarseth (2001) argues that digital games ‘are both object and process’.

⁴ This schism is described thoroughly by Frasca (2003), and more recently by Bogost (2006) and Jones (2008).

⁵ In German the terms “leeway” or “room for manoeuvre” are commonly translated as Spielraum (lit. “room for play”), similar to the technical term “play” in English. Against this etymological background, the relationship between digital games and what I have called ludic philosophy becomes even more obvious.

⁶ Other than the general public discourse, Saitō (2000) attributes a rather ‘conservative sexuality’ to the otaku despite their preference for homoerotic or violent and pornographic manga in his book. See also Azuma (2001: 129-130).

⁷ According to Grassmuck (2000), it was Okada’s concern was ‘to establish otaku as a new type of expert who focuses on the style, special effects and signature of individual comic artists. Where Gutenberg-schooled readers detect a story, writes Okada (1995), the otaku first of all refer to the syntactic levels. Their judgment is based on an extensive knowledge of the particular genre allowing them to decode quotations, grasp references, and appreciate nuances’. He describes otaku as ‘people possessing an advanced visual sensation’ and a ‘new type’ of adaptation to the cultural condition of advanced consumer and information society. To Azuma (2001: 8), otaku can thus not be described merely as ‘youths enjoying a moratorium’ based on of their juvenile and passionate collecting. For the idea of a generation in a moratorium see also Okonogi (1977).

⁸ Azuma’s work was published as an English translation in 2009 as *Otaku: Japan’s Database Animals* on the University of Minnesota Press, all the quotes in this article are translated from the original Japanese by the author.

⁹ Kojève argues that Japan is a society of ‘formalized values’, values that have no meaningful content anymore but are solely gratuitous (playful, but neither work nor fight for prestige). Examples – snobbery, the Noh Theater, the ceremony of tea, the art of flower bouquet – only formal detail, it does not really matter one way or the other. Kojève says that since animals cannot be snobs, there is hope for some kind of human existence to persist even into the post-history. Man would not really be capable anymore of transforming content, but would only be able to confront one form by another. As Kojève says, man would ‘opposed himself as a pure “form” to himself and to others taken as “content” of any sort’ (Kojève, 1969: 162, ft 6).

¹⁰ It was Bolter (1991: 163) who emphasized the relationship between Derridian poststructuralism and hypertext as well. Bolter argues, based on the rhizomatic structure of the internet or databases, that electronic texts do not have a centre or margins because of their ‘deconstructive reading’: ‘The reader can follow paths through the space in any direction, limited only by constraints established by the author. No path through the space need be stigmatized as marginal’.

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Biographical Statement

Fabian Schäfer is a research associate in Japanese Studies at the East-Asian Institute of the University of Leipzig. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Leipzig with a thesis on the beginnings of media and communication research in Prewar Japan. His current research interests include Japanese cultural studies, critical theory and transnational intellectual history.

Email: fschaefer@gmail.com