

THE GAME'S THE THING:
A CULTURAL STUDIES APPROACH TO WAR MEMORY, GENDER, AND POLITICS IN
JAPANESE VIDEOGAMES

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ABSTRACT

This thesis establishes a framework for analyzing Japanese pseudo-historical ludic media within the Japanese ideo-cultural context from a Cultural Studies perspective. It examines how discourses of war memory, gender, and politics inflect the texts of *Onimusha* (2001), *Sengoku BASARA* (2005), and *Metal Gear Solid* (1998). As artifacts of a demonized militarism and societal pacifism, these games justify ludic violence with player-avatars who have defensive masculinities. Through interactivity, however, this mechanism interrogates pacifism. In this questioning, these games take on transformative potential as cultural technologies. *Onimusha* and *Sengoku BASARA* seek to foreclose upon this potential through narrative denunciation and parody. Conversely, *Metal Gear Solid* leaves this potential open. As a game whose narrative supports a progressive political agenda, it unintentionally endorses an ultraconservative conception of both politics and history—thereby constituting a nationalistic argument. In sum, this research suggests that videogames are imbricated in processes of imagining Japanese nationhood.

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Introduction: The Wonder(ing) Years of Videogames

The 1990s in Japan, the so-called “lost decade,” was a period characterized by a general sense of social malaise instigated by the breaking of the bubble economy.¹ Years of unprecedented financial growth ground to a halt, giving way to two decades of recession. Japan also experienced the Great Hanshin Earthquake in 1995, and domestic terror in the form of the Aum Shinrikyō Sarin Gas attacks a few months later. Simultaneously, however, the decade also saw “[t]he growing popularity of Japanese anime, comic, and videogame products around the world.”² Japanese videogame companies took advantage of the North American videogame crash in 1993 to increase their market share, such that, “[i]n 2002, it is estimated that Japan accounted for nearly 50% of the world's gaming market.”³ Even though this share has fallen steadily since the mid-2000s, Japan’s industry has maintained a yearly revenue of around \$20 billion for the last decade. Surpassed only by the United States, Japan is a major producer of ludic medium within a worldwide trade that has, since the 1970s, grown into one of the world’s largest entertainment industries.

So astounding has been the rise of videogames that Game Studies has grown as a discipline in its own right since the late 1990s. Still in its infancy, the field has tended towards a formalism that rarely takes a game’s country of origin into account, let alone the greater cultural moment of its production. Instead, studies that stress the hybrid nature of the industry’s growth abound—no doubt a bi-product of the coterminous emergence of Game Studies with theories of

¹ Tomiko Yoda and Harry D. Harootunian, "Introduction," in *Japan after Japan: Social and Cultural Life from the Recessionary 1990s to the Present*, ed. Tomiko Yoda and Harry D. Harootunian (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 11.

² This phenomenon is occasionally referred to in Japanese as the lost two decades (*ushinawareta nijūnen*).

³ Marc Cieslak, "Is the Japanese Gaming Industry in Crisis?," *BBC Click*, Nov. 4 2010.

globalism.⁴ Nor are these claims baseless: flows of technology from the United States to Japan in the 1970s did indeed jumpstart the industry there.⁵

However, this alone is not enough to dismiss the cultural facets of videogame production in Japan. How did the socio-political scene of the 1990s inform the growth of the Japanese industry in the same period? To simply overlook the local meanings of game texts, particularly within the environment of their production, undermines their potential research value as artifacts. It neglects an important set of tools that area studies can bring to the formal theorization of games. Moreover, failure to address games as artifacts risks imposing Euro-American (“universal”) regimes of knowledge upon the medium in a manner that teaches us little about Japan itself.

This thesis, therefore, offers a framework that bridges the gap between Game Studies and Japanese Studies. I propose that games are shaped by the socio-political concerns of their developers’ everyday lives, and thereby accrue meaning within their “domestic” context. In other words, ludic media are cultural artifacts that become meaningful within their specific ideocultural environments. I further argue that, within their contexts of production, games also take on a transformative potential. They are complex cultural technologies that can represent their constituent discourses in novel ways—and thereby offer certain messages through interweaving political and ideological subtexts. In other words, games are products of, and contributors to, the greater socio-cultural fabric of Japan.

Naturally, this cloth contains any number of threads, and I do not propose to pull on them

⁴ For example, see Mia Consalvo, "Convergence and Globalization in the Japanese Videogame Industry," *Cinema Journal* 48, no. 3 (2009); "Console Video Games and Global Corporations: Creating a Hybrid Culture," *New Media & Society* 8, no. 1 (2006).

⁵ For example, see Martin Picard, "The Foundation of Geemu: A Brief History of Early Japanese Video Games," *Game Studies* 13, no. 2 (2014).

all. Rather, I am interested in several key discourses that bridge the 1990s and 2000s. At heart, each of these discourses is related to a heightened sense of wondering that was partially retrospective in its gaze. By wondering, I mean a space of opened perspectives and critical thought, yet lacking in any definitive conclusions or consensus. As Harry Harootunian argues:

[T]he present [1990s] has provided a space for a convergence of political and economic insolvency and a greater consciousness of memory and history, however contingent, and thus the figure of a consequential conjuncture in which the political and economic failures of the 1990s have overdetermined the need to explain the present by resorting to memory and history as a way of alerting Japanese to repressed possibilities that must now be resuscitated if the future is to look different from the present.⁶

This reevaluation considered Japan's "Long Postwar," the economic and social status quo that extended from defeat up until the early 90s. Rather than considerations of "the war itself, or indeed the vast complex history before the war," Japan's self-image rested upon "the memory of living through the postwar, [and] the nation in defeat... [which] was coupled with the idea of culture to construct an endless present."⁷ In other words, Japan was so caught up in overcoming defeat that a broad societal reflection on the conflict itself fell by the wayside. This moment of triumphant progress, then, led to the dominant nationhood of postwar period.

The retrospective wondering of the 1990s, in reconsidering the status quo, looked particularly to war memory, gender, and political identities. Indeed, this was a period marked by many pundits, such as the infamous *Atarashii rekishi kyōkasho o tsukuru kai*, calling for revisionist histories. At their most nationalistic, these groups downplayed or outright ignored wartime atrocities; at their most progressive, they reviewed Japanese responsibility and memory with a critical eye. In the background, "other" masculinities came to prominence during the

⁶ Harry D. Harootunian, "Japan's Long Postwar: The Trick of Memory and the Ruse of History," in *Japan after Japan: Social and Cultural Life from the Recessionary 1990s to the Present*, ed. Tomiko Yoda and Harry D. Harootunian (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 107.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 98-101.

1990s: the *otaku* consumer, “a geeky, obsessive, socially inept, technologically fluent nerd,” took his place as “the polar opposite of the image of the gregarious, socializing breadwinner, the salaryman”—theretofore the hegemonic form of masculinity in Japan.⁸ This development was partially predicated upon popular forms of culture, of which videogames were undoubtedly one. Lastly, the 1990s saw a significant reconfiguration of the political left and right, and an attendant rethinking of the U.S.-Japan relationship.⁹ In short, this was a period wherein war memory, gender, and political identities were in a state of flux.

This thesis is devoted to considering how videogames grew within this environment. As artifacts, how did they navigate these fraught topics? As technologies, how did they contribute to these greater discourses? In answering, I hope to show that games have attempted to eschew overt commentary on societal matters, yet have unintentionally added surprising perspectives to the greater mix.

Aims and Method

Practically speaking, my aims are twofold. First, I seek to incorporate the particular concerns of Japanese socio-political discourses in a methodology for reading ludic media in context. Second, I apply this methodology by analyzing three specific examples of games produced between 1998 and 2005. I have no aspirations to be comprehensive in this endeavor. Rather, I choose three texts that I believe to be representative of what I term the “pseudo-historical” genre. This is a category of my own devising. I use it to broadly indicate games that are rooted within the historical imaginary; that is, games that draw their settings from the real

⁸ Ian Condry, "Love Revolution: Anime, Masculinity, and the Future," in *Recreating Japanese Men*, ed. Sabine Frühstück and Anne Walthall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), p. 263.

⁹ Yoda and Harootunian, “Introduction,” p. 4.

past. In this sense, certain forms of science fiction meet this criterion insofar as they root their predictions in “true” history. The “pseudo” denotes that these works are not serious attempts to analyze either the past or present. Thus, they are not intentionally engaged with the societal forces that Harootunian indicates. Put another way, this study considers the re-presentation of history as focused through a lens of historical memory. In both cases, the truth claims of these products to the historical facts is minimal, often purposely so. Rather, I see these games in dialogue with a basically ahistorical cultural memory and imaginary.

I consider the complex relationship these cultural discourses and game-texts from a Cultural Studies perspective; that is, weighing the texts against greater societal discourses. It is in this light that I label these products as artifacts: each game is less an intentional argument than a reflection of a fragmented landscape. Retrospective wondering, or its legacy in later games, shapes these texts at a much deeper level: the representation of their content ultimately refracts not only contemporary concerns, but is also molded by discussions of war memory, gender, and political identity. This point is most visible in developers’ design choices. Due to interactivity—the particular characteristic of the medium—certain ideologies of the Long Postwar constrain ludic production. However, in the games that I analyze, these constrictions and omissions themselves manifest in ways that may be read as commentary upon our key ideologies. My goal moving forward, then, is to situate three pseudo-historical games amongst greater discourses, and to explore their particular textual form and message as it may influence the player.

With this understanding, I analyze *Onimusha* (2001), *Sengoku BASARA* (2005), and *Metal Gear Solid* (1998). The first two take place during a fictionalized version of the *Sengoku* period (1467-1603), with various samurai—real and fabricated—as protagonists. The last, conversely, features a contemporary geopolitical plot that requires an American agent to stop

rogue U.S. military forces.

Although these products evidently differ in content, they have a number of common points. They are all, for instance, single-player games; that is, designed to be played individually and offline.¹⁰ They are also action games, in a broad sense. In other words, they each have the player taking control of an avatar in three-dimensional space. Gameplay—the actions of the player avatar in simulated space—involves combat to greater or lesser degrees in all three. Each game was also released on the Sony PlayStation platform. Generally, Sony’s products have been the highest-selling home gaming consoles in Japan, and the company has come to cast a long shadow over both domestic and international markets in terms of hardware.¹¹ Moreover, the PlayStation has generally held a more adult image (whether this be defined in terms of a game’s thematic, violent, or sexual content) than Nintendo’s immensely popular handheld consoles. All three games fit this image, within a limit: under the Japanese Computer Entertainment Rating Organization (CERO), *Onimusha* and *Metal Gear* are both rated “C” (15 years or older), while *BASARA* is rated “B” (12 years or older).¹² The popularity of my case studies, then, owes something to the ubiquity of the PlayStation platform, as well as their relatively accessible ratings. For reasons that I will enumerate presently, these games are also broadly designed with a male audience in mind.

¹⁰ I make this point to distinguish the games I analyze from “Massively multiplayer online role-playing games” (MMORPGs), of which there have been several studies. For more on this genre, see T. L. Taylor, *Play between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006). and Dean Chan, “Locating Play,” in *Asian Popular Culture: New, Hybrid, and Alternate Media*, ed. John A. Lent and Lorna Fitzsimmons (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2013).

¹¹ The PlayStation 1 (1994) sold over 19 million units in Japan alone, while the PlayStation 2 (2000) managed to hit 23 million.

¹² The CERO system itself features one category below these (“A:” Appropriate for all), and two above: “D” (17 years and older) and “Z” (18 years and older). Interestingly, a perusal of “Z” games brings up many American games, but very few Japanese ones.

Relatedly, each game garnered particular success within Japan either critically or commercially, and all have subsequently been serialized. The works I analyze are remarkable insofar as they are the first products in what have since become sprawling intellectual properties (IPs). *Onimusha*, for instance, sold 1.04 million copies in Japan alone, and grew as a franchise over the course of a decade to include three AAA titles (the gaming equivalent of the Hollywood blockbuster) and several secondary products (B or C movies). *Sengoku BASARA* (2005) boasted less impressive sales initially, but nevertheless has become a gargantuan transmedia IP that includes four main titles, any number of secondary ones, and a fairly popular *anime* series. Both *Onimusha* and *BASARA* were produced by Capcom, one of Japan's largest videogame producers. *Metal Gear Solid*, conversely, is a highly-profitable IP belonging to Konami Digital Entertainment. Selling between 780,000 and 1 million copies in Japan, it is by far the most critically-acclaimed of the three games, with awards from *Bunkachō* Media Arts and the Entertainment Supplier's Association.¹³ As an IP, it now contains five AAA titles and several fairly well-received spinoffs.

Each of these games, moreover, has a significant international following. Doubtlessly, this had an influence upon the developmental process as well. Nonetheless, my concern with this thesis is to examine these games within Japan itself. As such, I focus on how these games mean within the intertext of Japanese ideo-culture; that is, the discourses which interpenetrate everyday life within a certain geographical space. This choice is informed by my personal experiences working within the Japanese videogame industry for two years. As an in-house localizer at one of the most prestigious companies in Japan, I was responsible for the North American release and ongoing production of content for several mobile and one AAA game.

¹³Anonymous, "'Taitanikku' genshō (Kiiwādo de kurikaeru geinō 98 nen)," *Aera* 1998.

During my tenure there, I was struck by the insularity to developmental practices within the company. Indeed, it was as if the existence of a localization department freed the developers from many concerns of how global audiences—which were highly profitable—would receive their games.¹⁴ Naturally, producers and directors were hardly blind to international markets, but there was a much stronger inward orientation to their gaze than an outward one. This seemingly held true for what market trends and design benchmarks they watched, and extended even to some of their design choices. For instance, in a game which was set in a Western fantasy world, the characters would nevertheless bow in a socially, even professionally, normative fashion in Japan. This may seem a small point, but it suggests a host of small, unanalyzed assumptions that informed the game-text that interlaced a game supposedly free from any elements of Japanese culture.

My professional experiences lead me to situate my study within the Japanese domestic context precisely so that I may consider what underlies this host of small assumptions. While I acknowledge that certain textual elements and developmental practices are indeed hybrid, I contend that the meanings of these games arise against a “Japanese” background. In this, I am implicitly assuming that games mean intertextually; therefore, the geographically-located discourses against which ludic media can become meaningful should not escape the gaze of the game researchers. This is neither to ascribe some ineffable authenticity to these products within their domestic contexts, nor to deny that some of the meanings I find in my analysis do transfer to other ideo-cultural or national contexts. For the purposes of the present study, however, I limit myself to considering the relationship between Japanese ideo-culture, games, and Japanese

¹⁴ Interestingly, I felt that there was certain underlying ideology to this stance whereby cultural difference could be assuaged largely by linguistic means—that is, translation.

players.

I similarly limit the scope of my study to the strictly textual. My goal is to demonstrate a means of conceptualizing ludic media on the theoretical level. As such, several of my claims, particularly related to games-as-technologies, merit further empirical investigation than I have been able to provide. In this regard, I imagine my work as a pilot study, one half of a longer research project that involves in-depth ethnographical investigations into the reception of these products amongst Japanese players.

With this understanding, I now turn to a brief examination of the current literature. While *Onimusha*, *Sengoku BASARA*, and *Metal Gear Solid* are particularly popular pseudo-historical games, they are not alone in terms of popular media that borrow from the past. Indeed, the use of history in popular texts and media is a phenomenon of which Japanese Studies has taken heed. In positioning pseudo-historical games, then, a comparison with other historical media is instructive.

The Past as an Ideo-Historical Playground

Perhaps most famously, Carol Gluck has argued that manipulations of history—as well as interpretations thereof—can impart certain values to perceptions of the present. Particularly, she argues that the (re)imaginings of the Edo period (1603-1868) have been key in constructing ideo-historical narratives in Japan. By means of othering the real past, positively or negatively, Gluck shows how contemporary thinkers have variously redefined the meaning of “Japan.” Thus, Edo has acted as “the mirror of modernity” through a fluid series of “un-pre-proto-post modern” identities.¹⁵

¹⁵ Carol Gluck, "The Invention of Edo," in *Mirror of Modernity: Invented Traditions of Modern Japan*, ed. Stephen Vlastos (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 262, 283.

Within interactive texts, can this selfsame use of the past occur? In other words, what happens when players are allowed to willfully manipulate history? From a historical perspective, Andrew B.R. Elliott and Matthew Kapell have suggested that, rather than acting as mere pedagogical tool for teaching historical fact, a videogame's power lies more in its ability to re-present history; that is, to (re)narrate the past. The design of a game allows not only for an immersion in history, but also for facilitating player understanding of the "complex discourse of contingency, conditions, and circumstances, which underpins a genuine understanding of history."¹⁶ In "doing" even vaguely realistic simulations of history, the player is reminded that the past was dynamic, and may come to reconsider the idea of the history as inevitable.

In the Japanese context, several studies have posited that historical fiction serves a similar function as a means of commenting upon and critiquing the contemporary. Hori Hikari notes how fictionalized versions of the past may comment upon the present to denaturalize it. She looks specifically to the works of Yoshinaga Fumi (*Ōoku*) and Yoshiya Nobuko (*Tokugawa no fujintachi*), both of whom deal with the Tokugawa Shogunate's inner chambers. She argues that the reversal of gender roles in the texts, which place women as the key figures in the past, seeks to denaturalize the masculinization of history. However, whereas Yoshiya tries to "offer a counter-narrative against the male-dominated existing narrative mode of popular literature," Yoshinaga instead decries the violence inherent in heterosexual power relations.¹⁷ Here, the authors' willful manipulation of history foregrounds and questions a present arising from such

¹⁶ Andrew B. R. Elliott and Matthew Kapell, "Introduction: To Build a Past That Will "Stand the Test of Time--Discovering Historical Facts, Assembling Historical Narratives," in *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History*, ed. Andrew B. R. Elliott and Matthew Kapell (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 13.

¹⁷ Hikari Hori, "Views from Elsewhere: Female Shoguns in Yoshinaga Fumi's *Ōoku* and Their Precursors in Japanese Popular Culture," *Japanese Studies* 32, no. 1 (2012), p. 84.

rhetoric: namely, one characterized by *ryōsai kenbo* (“good wife, wise mother”) that implicitly created a gendered division of labor in the service of national progress.

An analogous line of thought is evident in Rosa Lee’s analysis of *anime* and *manga* that deal with the *shinsengumi*—the pro-Shogun units dispatched to stop marauding pro-Emperor forces towards the end of the Edo Period. She is interested in the *shinsengumi* specifically as Shiba Ryōtarō’s *Moeyo ken* (serialized 1962-1964) and the manga *Gintama* (serialized 2004-present) represent them. Whereas fans were drawn to the earlier work as a means of mitigating the pressures of Japanese communitarianism in the midst of breakneck economic development, later fans appreciated *Gintama* in the 2000s because “people’s efforts to find their individuality [are] being hindered by social and cultural constraints.”¹⁸ The past here is a mirror, one that reflects contemporary ideals onto times long past so as to consciously comment upon the now.

The primary difference between these various uses of history and the pseudo-historical genre of games is largely one of intent. Historical games—and I include even works of historical fiction in this category—seem to find use as vehicles for comment upon the contemporary or to question the inevitability of history. While the pseudo-historical works that I examine *may* serve similar functions, I believe it is ultimately unintentional. *Onimusha*, *BASARA*, and *Metal Gear* are not about history as such; they do not attempt to create teleological narratives that result, for better or worse, in the present. Their fiction itself is not an intentional comment upon the present, and their divergences from reality serve an altogether different purpose that I will explore in greater detail as this study unfolds. For the moment, however, let us simply note that the past in my case studies is a space for play. These games use history (and, to a lesser extent, the future) as a platform for ludic activity.

¹⁸ Rosa Lee, "Romanticising Shinsengumi in Contemporary Japan," *New Voices* 4 (2011), p. 184.

Perhaps the closest use of pseudo-history can be found within Hasegawa Kazumi's chapter on *otome* games, a genre designed for female consumers. She argues that these works allow players to join in the “queering of history,’ [and] challenging the constrained discourse of difference and identity” when featuring the *shinsengumi*.¹⁹ Echoing Lee, she notes that this group have been a site of pop cultural fascination as “their stories illustrate the prototypical legends of Japanese tragic heroes;” that is, those espousing the pre-modern values of samurai loyalty.²⁰ Such values are encoded with heteronormative masculinity—and thereby designed for the consumption by heterosexual female players. Nevertheless, female fan communities often cosplay as men, the female objects of desire, through cross-dressing, thus subverting the gender roles of the patriarchy. The power of such games lies in their capacity to imagine history through play—both on and off the screen. This, in turn, allows players to reconsider their own identities as female. Though the game itself is gendered female, players rewrite historical narratives by immersing themselves in the past and transgressing their own implied role as heterosexual women. In this regard, these games do have an unintended effect on the subjectivity of their players through an ultimately fictional account of the past. As Hyeshin Kim argues, “[w]omen’s games are significant not simply because their existence potentially empowers the player with the understanding that she can be the normative, dominant audience, but also because she can experiment with and enact various female identities and female fantasies through the medium of electronic games.”²¹ Thus, these *otome* games act as cultural technologies.

The obvious difference between *otome* games and the pseudo-historical games that I

¹⁹ Kazumi Hasegawa, "Falling in Love with History: Japanese Girls *Otome* Sexuality and Queering Historical Imagination," in *Playing with the Past*, p. 136.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

²¹ Hyeshin Kim, "Women's Games in Japan: Gendered Identity and Narrative Construction," *Theory, Culture & Society* 26, no. 2-3 (2009), p. 20.

examine is largely one of gendered narrative: the former is feminized, and the latter broadly masculinized. One point of further interest in the games I examine, then, is the implication of a male audience. How *Onimusha*, *BASARA*, and *Metal Gear* construct masculinity, as we shall see, is often tied to gendered violence. How, then, do games contend with the memories of violent men—or, more pointedly, violent soldiers? Ultimately, the specific strategies of all three games imbricate war memory, gender, and political positions.

Chapter Outline

This thesis is divided into three chapters, each of which broadly explores the interstices of war memory, gender, and political positions. Chapter 1 provides the backbone for both formal analyses of ludic media, and specific facets of games within the Japanese context. Of particular interest are the key strategies that ludic media have evolved for dealing with violence against a cultural backdrop of political pacifisms. I explore how games turn away from historical simulations of war to instead embrace fictional settings, and how they use narrative positioning of the avatar to juxtapose the Japanese player with themes of militarism. This, in turn, allows for the logical possibility of non-militaristic violence.

Chapter 2 points to the centrality of gender in these works. I broadly consider how morality and masculinity work in tandem to allow for the possibility of justified violence. Through readings of *Onimusha* and *Sengoku BASARA*, I note how games have followed the example set by 1990s Japanese war films. From this precedent, both games construct masculinities defined by their ability to protect, which inscribes a moral imperative to use certain forms of violence. However, these masculinities cannot quite outrun the shadow cast by the Imperial Japanese Army (IJA). An ambiguity, therefore, lies at the heart of this construct that both *Onimusha* and *BASARA* take into account in two separate ways.

Chapter 3 explores *Metal Gear Solid* through considering how the fragmented landscapes of war memory and political identity give meaning to the game's structure. As a work that deals directly with (American) militarism, the game aligns itself with post-war pacifism. However, it ultimately undercuts this message in terms of both narrative and play. Though it attempts to condemn a demonized caricature of the IJA, it oscillates between progressive and centrist views of history, and opens a hole into which flows an (ultra)nationalist understanding of the past. This last message is encoded into the player's actions in such a way as to question the legitimacy of moral pacifism. I finally argue that, more than the other games, *Metal Gear* contains a transformative potential to (re)inform the player's political subjectivity.

Chapter 1: The Elements of the Pseudo-Historical Genre

If games are to function both as artifacts and as technologies, they must somehow act as circuits both drawing from, and contributing to, greater social currents. Thus, I begin by commenting upon this process in two basic ways. I start with the formal characteristics of videogames that imbue them with the capacity for transformation. I subsequently comment upon the greater social discourses of war memory that contour the game text of pseudo-historical works, and in so doing lend meaning to the player's actions.

After discussing the basic three-part structure of games, I contend that a game's narrative and play ultimately contain transformative potential insofar as they provide an opportunity for player reflection. In other words, it is a socialized subject who apprehends a game's textual messages, and connects it again with external discourses. Though the game itself may provide the spark, then, it is ultimately the player herself who acts as a conduit.

With this understanding, I turn to considerations of the social role of violence within pseudo-historical action games. I open with differences within American and Japanese memories of the Pacific War that explain why the United States has produced so many simulations of the conflict, and why Japan has produced so few (and none of any real stature). In short, the pseudo-historical genre must contend with a socio-cultural background of pacifism that stems in large part from war memories that highlight the civilian experience while demonizing the military. Simulative games featuring realistic soldiery—and certain types of militaristic violence—take a political stance that distances them from more widely-accepted narratives of the war. Instead, pseudo-historical games turn to what I term fictional displacement, a strategy of giving games at least partially fantastic settings that divorce the Japanese player from any real memories of the Pacific War. In this sense, war memory acts as a deep structure lending shape to the distinct

manifestations of certain tropes in ludic media.

Even under fictional displacement, however, intertextual references connecting the player's actions to militaristic violence are problematic. Thus, games often use their fantastic setting to oppose the player with emblems of militarism. This renders any violence he or she uses defensive, rather than aggressive. I subsequently offer a typology of videogame violence, arguing for a tripartite model that examines the actual content of the violence; the diegetic frame, that is, how it is construed within the game story; and finally, the cultural context, or how violent acts take on meaning within the confines of a given culture. After defining militaristic violence in this view, I argue that it serves to continue the general societal demonization of the Imperial Japanese Army (IJA). However, I note that there is an inherent ambiguity in pairing the player with violence of any kind, particularly within the pseudo-historical genre that has more obvious ties to history imaginaries. Amongst other elements, this ambiguity allows players to reflect upon the actions and position of their avatar in the game.

Games as Games: Procedural Rhetoric and Player-Subjectivity

To begin, we must discern the formal properties of videogames as a medium. We may postulate a three-part structure broadly shared by all videogames with a certain degree of narrative sophistication.¹ First, there is the storyworld, the general setting in which a videogame occurs. Second, there is the diegetic frame for the player avatar's actions: what rules of the

¹ In general, Japanese videogames from the 1990s onwards have generally been a narrativized form, if not a narrative one in the strictest sense of the term. Thus, although I am aware of the so-called ludology-narratology debate, I believe that the story of certain games is critical in the analysis thereof. For more in this vein, see Dennis Washburn, "Imagined History, Fading Memory: Mastering Narrative in Final Fantasy X," *Mechademia* 4, no. 1 (2009), Marie-Laure Ryan, *Avatars of Story* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006) and Marie-Laure and Jan-Noel Thon Ryan, eds., "Storyworlds across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology," *Style* 49, no. 4 (2015).

storyworld contextualize his or her behavior? This may be defined either through narrative constraints, or through the rules of play. Finally, there is gameplay itself—the actions of the player within digital space.

In each of these three categories, games communicate with the player at two levels: via the narrative (storyworld and diegetic frame), and via what Ian Bogost has termed “procedural rhetoric.”² Bogost’s theory ascribes meaning to the structure of gameplay as defined and policed by the game rules.³ In other words, videogames contain a certain underlying message regarding what players can do and why the game asks them to do it. Herein lies the rhetorical power of rules: a perlocutionary act (a direct request) can take the guise of an illocutionary one (a statement with an implied request).

If we may interpret procedural meaning through this framework, how do we relate gameplay to a game’s narrative? Espen Aarseth offers a simple but powerful model: a game’s plot is borne by “kernels,” or essential pieces of the story that the player cannot change. Linking these together are “satellites,” connective sections that allow for interactivity.⁴ Structured through the rules of play, satellites are home to procedural rhetoric. A linear game—with a set story and a predetermined order to player actions—will be composed of alternating kernels and satellites. The former establishes why the avatar is in a given situation, and the latter allows the player to act.

Though these frameworks describe the textual properties of videogames well, they treat

² Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), pp. 74-75, 99-101.

³ Throughout this paper, I use “player” to describe videogame consumers as both spectator and agent.

⁴ Espen Aarseth, "A Narrative Theory of Games," in *FDG '12*, ed. Magy Seif El-nasr, Mia Consalvo, and Steven Feiner (2012), p. 131.

the player as a passive, unthinking recipient of the game's message. Miguel Sicart's work, which establishes the player as an ethical actor, is enlightening in this regard. He argues that "[g]ames can have ethical affordances because they are designed and experienced by *moral agents*."⁵ The potential for morality lies in what the rules of play allow, and what the rules of simulation—the logic of the storyworld—demand. Rules of play may give players opportunities to make ethical choices, while the rules of simulation may impose a moral regime upon them. In either case, the player can vicariously experience situations foreign to their everyday lives, and reflect on the morality of their avatar's acts.

Sicart sees this potential for reflection as inherent, given that games are Foucauldian power structures. He argues that games exert an influence over the player through the rules of play and simulation, and thereby create a player-subjectivity. Bonded to the power structure, this subject exists to play: "A game operates as an event that creates a subject, a subject that needs to be faithful to the event's constitution to come into being."⁶ The player-subjectivity, however, does not exist in isolation from the myriad other subjectivities that compose a person. Sicart refers here to the "body-subject" that "takes place in the world of experiences, both passively and actively."⁷ Just as the player-subjectivity may emerge in contexts other than the game, so too may the body-subject intrude on the gaming experience. The player is a moral agent precisely because of this two-layered identity: the body-subject, through lived experience, evaluates and reflects upon the actions of the player-subjectivity within the game. The fundamental mechanism for moral agency is "*ludic phronesis*," or a pause in the flow of play wherein the body-subject

⁵ Miguel Sicart, *The Ethics of Computer Games* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), p. 41; emphasis mine.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

can evaluate the best choice among multiple options, or reflect on the ethicality of an imposed regime.⁸

Though Sicart's focus is on matters moral, he also notes that "understanding the player-subject as a skin [of the body-subject] is a useful metaphor because it connects the internal, individual subjectivity of the player with the larger communitarian, *cultural, and historical subjectivities* of the contemporary self."⁹ In other words, the body-subject exists in part due to historical narratives, which inform a person's sense of identity. Through the player-subjectivity, the body-subject may explore differing versions of both culture and history. Having tasted of these "other" experiences, the body-subject must make sense of them, a process that involves reconsidering certain societal discourses. While any media can arguably make this claim, videogames alone require the player-subject to experience others' conceptions of these discourses. Here, then, lies the potential for games to connect disparate discourses within the thinking body-subject.

It is important to note that *ludic phronesis* is not simply structured by what the player does. Rather, the diegetic frame and storyworld each work to contextualize the gameplay in ways that ultimately influence the meaning of the player-subjectivity's acts. Thus, all of these factors merit consideration when asking how the game influences the player, or how any game's formal elements shape *ludic phronesis*.

All of this ultimately rests upon the greater culture within which a game text functions. I define "culture" here as a dynamic site of numerous discourses coalescing and clashing. No given ideology is necessarily unique to a national context; rather, I tend to think that such things

⁸ Miguel Sicart, "Moral Dilemmas in Computer Games," *Design Issues* 29, no. 3 (2013), p. 31.

⁹ Sicart, *The Ethics of Computer Games*, p. 79; emphasis mine.

drift unseen between geographic borders. Nevertheless, a specific configuration of ideologies may be distinct to a given territorial unit. Thus, the meanings derived through play—that is, through narrative conceits and *ludic phronesis*—function in a certain fashion within the national context of their production. Put another way, we must consider not only the constituent discourses within a game, but also the greater ideologies external to it in order to perform ideological readings. This point draws us to war memory as the operative discourse which lends meanings to player’s violent play within action games.

Remediation: Narratives of the Victor and the Vanquished

In considering the relationship between cultural memory in general and ludic media, numerous scholars have turned to the concept of remediation.¹⁰ This theory describes how media have been “commenting on, reproducing, and replacing each other... Media need each other in order to function as media at all.”¹¹ As Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney note, cultural memory also depends upon a media for mass transmission, and the media themselves rely upon previous iterations.¹² The content of each text is in this sense “premediated” by other such texts.¹³ Premediation re-contextualizes past memories so that they may create schemata for future events, setting up a thematic chain where none may otherwise exist. Memory thus becomes “a

¹⁰ Alison Landsberg’s work on prosthetic memories has also been used to describe the relationship of cultural memory and videogames. For an example, see Laquana and Gaines S. Hubbell Cooke, "Working out Memory with a Medal of Honor Complex," *Game Studies* 15, no. 2 (2015).

¹¹ J. David and Richard A. Grusin Bolter, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), p. 55.

¹² Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney, "Introduction: Cultural Memory and Its Dynamics," in *Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory*, ed. Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), p. 1-7.

¹³ Debra Ramsay, *American Media and the Memory of World War II* (Taylor and Francis, 2015), p. 24.

procedural and transmedial phenomenon.”¹⁴ The dynamics affecting any given media product may be drawn from a rich tapestry of cultural myths, values, and relevant fiction.¹⁵

It is within this framework that we may understand the above disparity between American and Japanese ludic media set during WWII. This difference lies in war narratives: America was the victor, Japan the vanquished.¹⁶ U.S. media depictions of the conflict tend to portray it as a “good war” fought by GIs. As such, “the war memories of civilians and the experiences of soldiers and resistance fighters outside the US do not feature prominently” in media depictions of the war.¹⁷ This basic structure lends itself easily to the videogame format. Protagonists and antagonists may be cleanly shown as either Axis- or Allied-powers, the morality of the conflict validates the use of violence, and civilian casualties and suffering can be safely omitted. Perhaps the most representative model of this is *Medal of Honor* (1999)—a brainchild of Steven Spielberg following the success of *Saving Private Ryan*—which opened a decade of increasingly realistic first-person shooter (FPS) games featuring Americans battling Nazis.¹⁸ Although this genre has at times questioned aspects of the American narrative, its greatest contribution has been to remind players that combat can be fun—a point missing from most other depictions of war.¹⁹ These games present the battlefield as a playground of sorts, a platform to restore the sense of exhilaration in combat without troubling players with questions of civilian suffering.

¹⁴ Ramsay, *American Media*, p. 19.

¹⁵ Astrid Erll, "Remembering across Time, Space, and Cultures: Premediation, Remediation and the “Indian Mutiny”," in *Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory*, ed. Astrid and Rigney Erll, Ann (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), p. 112.

¹⁶ I use the term WWII here more generally, as there are far fewer American war narratives set during the Pacific theater than in Europe.

¹⁷ Ramsay, *American Media*, pp. 163-65.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 162-63.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 188-190.

Speaking strictly to these American media depictions of the war, Debra Ramsey posits the existence of mnemonic structures that act as storehouses of matter—deep structures, in a sense—for specific instances of remediation. Though these are constantly in flux, they nevertheless demarcate a range for media retellings of the war consistent with the U.S. war narrative. Realistic depictions may be remediated into a ludic format precisely because American collective memory generally agrees on the meaning of the Pacific War.

Conversely, Japan's collective memory does not lend itself easily to a playable format. There are two reasons for this. First, Japanese war narratives have yet to cohere into a single, dominant discourse. Second, the actions of a demonized IJA premeditate the Japanese player's actions, thus complicating the use of certain forms of violence.

Speaking to the former, great rifts divide “official” and “sectional narratives,” allowing for private and group memories to challenge nationalized ones.²⁰ Thus, while there are indubitably mnemonic structures beneath remediation, these are conflicted in nature. Moreover, they have become politicized—a point I will speak to in Chapter 3. In understanding how this fragmentation can affect cultural production, then, I align myself with Duncan Bell's assertion that memory is “the socially-framed property of individual minds, the neurologically inscribed traces of past events,” and that groups conjoined through the memory of shared experience are “bounded by both space...and time.”²¹ In other words, memories as such cannot pass between multiple generations over the great geographic distances that make up any nation. Thus, memories as they exist within the national consciousness must first be highly narrativized to

²⁰ Philip A. Seaton, *Japan's Contested War Memories: The 'Memory Rifts' in Historical Consciousness of World War II* (New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 14.

²¹ Duncan Bell, "Mythscapes: Memory, Mythology, and National Identity," *British Journal of Sociology* 54, no. 1 (2003), p. 72.

reflect certain values, at which point they become stories with great enough influence to be categorized as “myths.” Myths exist in abundance within a national imaginary, and come into conflict over issues such as collective identity.²² Bell terms this space the “mythscape,” a theoretical site of dynamic interaction and conflict between dissimilar historical accounts.

I argue that war memory, as it pertains to pseudo-historical games, is ultimately a matter of myth. As we shall see, games are at odds to historically depict the war precisely because they are bound by the key principles of these myths. In other words, while war memory may not provide the content of games, it nevertheless shapes cultural production through the frameworks of attendant myths. Unlike the United States’ “good war,” no single hegemonic war myth lends itself easily to overt representation in Japan. While the (in)famous “victimhood narrative” does seem commonplace, Philip A. Seaton argues otherwise:

Victim consciousness is like the earth’s crust. It is the superficial level of Japanese war memories that is most visible, and with which both Japanese and non-Japanese ordinarily have most contact. It covers over the memory rifts and for much of the time preserves an appearance of calm and national unity in Japanese remembering. But the real forces that shape the landscape of Japanese memories are deeper down... The superficial crust of victim consciousness offers no protection against the upheavals caused when the friction between powerful oppositional forces below the surface (the ‘ideological tectonic plates’) becomes too great.²³

Nevertheless, Seaton also notes that the victimhood narrative is useful to cultural production precisely because it is the lowest common denominator. Moreover, as Harootunian argues, “it would be hard...to find a national experience that has dwelled so long and longingly on the postwar [as Japan].”²⁴ In this, he suggests the presence of what Igarashi Yoshikuni has called the

²² Duncan Bell, “Introduction: Memory, Trauma and World Politics,” in *Memory, Trauma and World Politics: Reflections on the Relationship between Past and Present*, ed. Duncan Bell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 2.

²³ Seaton, *Japan's Contested War Memories*, p. 25.

²⁴ Harootunian, “Japan's Long Postwar,” p. 99.

“foundational narrative.” This mechanism allowed for the U.S.-Japan alliance at the war’s end, marking the severance with modern history that moved Japan into the Long Postwar. It worked, however, by casting Emperor Hirohito as an uninvolved innocent, rather than the head of the military. Holding Hirohito “responsible only for his attempt to bring peace to Japan,” the civilian populace became victims of the IJA—the military force that hijacked the rightful government.²⁵ Through transferring their guilt for the war onto the IJA, civilians could forget their own involvement and support for imperialism. The total effect of this, then, was to divorce the civilian experience of the war from the military.

The Improbability of Japanese Simulation War Games

While the “foundational narrative” is not uncontested, it nevertheless figures prominently into Japan’s Long Postwar. Moreover, its core tenets broadly premeditate cultural production in general. Thus, it is within the logical constraints of this structure that interactive simulations of militarism become highly problematic in the Japanese context. Filmic representations of the war have themselves had to navigate the fraught waters of war memory, often by portraying civilian narratives of the conflict. Videogames cannot follow this example for two reasons.

First and foremost, videogames require player input to progress. However, playing a game that requires acts of violence as a member of the Japanese military—with the attendant implication of fun—has the power to deeply undercut the logic of the foundational narrative. To create a simulation of the Pacific War would oppose the Japanese player-subjectivity with American or Asian military forces. Obviously, the former is problematic due to the post-war

²⁵ Yoshikuni Igarashi, "The Bomb, Hirohito, and History: The Foundational Narrative of United States-Japan Postwar Relations," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 6, no. 2 (1998), p. 271.

U.S.-Japan alliance, a strategic bond that has broad popular support.²⁶ The U.S. does not constitute a monolithic and defunct political institution akin to the Third Reich that can be easily demonized, and militaristic violence against American soldiers is therefore untenable.

Conversely, to attack other Asians raises memories of Japanese colonialism that have been at least partially repressed: “[o]utside this picture [the foundational narrative] are the people who were mobilized to serve the colonial ‘motherland’.”²⁷ A videogame simulating the killing or subjugation of Asian peoples would either raise the specter of civilian collusion in colonialism within the body-subject, or face widespread censure insofar as “anything between 50 and 80 per cent [of the population]...are either critical of the government’s ‘inadequate’ treatment of war responsibility issues...or are supportive of additional compensation and initiatives acknowledging aggression.”²⁸ Neither of these roads is copacetic to mainstream cultural production. The act of playing furthermore calls into question the mass denouncement of the empire’s acts on the continent. If killing is portrayed as fun, then games open an ideological bridge between the player-subjectivity and the callous acts of the IJA. This, in turn, problematizes the demonization of the old military. It is little wonder, then, that game companies would avoid this potential form of historical association.

Second, videogames cannot feature civilian protagonists if they wish to find potential audiences. Playing as a civilian during the Tokyo firebombing, for instance, holds little intrinsic

²⁶ While ultra-nationalists might take some pleasure in killing simulated Americans, centrists and progressives would certainly not. For more on Japan-U.S. relations, see Yoshio Sugimoto, "Nation and Nationalism in Contemporary Japan," in *The Sage Handbook of Nations and Nationalism*, ed. Gerard Delanty and Krishan Kumar (London: SAGE, 2006), and Paul Midford, "Japan-United States Relations," in *The Sage Handbook of Modern Japanese Studies*, ed. James Babb (London: SAGE, 2015).

²⁷ Sonia Ryang, *Japan and National Anthropology: A Critique* (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2004), p. 67.

²⁸ Seaton, *Japan's Contested War Memories*, p. 23.

appeal. Furthermore, portraying this experience as pleasure is incompatible with the collective memory of civilian trauma. In short, this form of simulation sits badly with both the victimhood and foundational narratives.

In sum, the nature of ludic media and the structure of Japanese war memory decreases the probability of war simulations. The possibility, of course, remains. Yet only by taking an overt political stance as ultranationalist can a game simulate the war itself. Such a work runs up against what Seaton terms the “profitability threshold,” or the notion that a cultural product targeted at groups other than the representative central political positions risks losing mass market appeal.²⁹ The better a game clings to the foundational narrative, then, the broader its audience, and the greater its potential profit.

The Ludic Strategy: Fictional Displacement

However, videogames nevertheless do bask in violence and encourage Japanese players to engage in fictional fights for the purposes of entertainment. Memories of the IJA premeditate such actions, and therefore necessitate some mechanism for allowing play as fun without implicating war memory. The question, then, is what strategies the medium has evolved to cope.

Let us once again return to the three-part structure of videogames: storyworld, diegetic frame, and gameplay. In a hypothetical simulation of war, the storyworld is a historical one, and the diegetic context for the player’s actions drawn from reality. Militarism would dictate the storyworld, the diegetic frame for the player avatar’s actions, and the content of gameplay: set in the Pacific War, the player-subjectivity would step into the shoes of an avatar linked to notions of soldiery. Militaristic play, then, would take as its targets Allied troops and other Asians through the eyes of the IJA. Conversely, the player could step into the shoes of an Allied

²⁹ Seaton, *Japan's Contested War Memories*, p. 30.

soldier—and potentially be forced to fight Japanese fighters.³⁰ No particular configuration of this will be entirely uncontentious: the conflict itself overrules every part of the game.

Should the storyworld become ahistorical or fantastic, however, the issues inherent in simulation fade. This move severs overt links to realistic or historical soldiery, and transforms militarism to a theme or a leitmotif. I argue that games seek to divorce militarism from the storyworld through this mechanism, which I term fictional displacement. If the storyworld itself is made fictional or fantastical, then the player-subjectivity need not be confined to the role of an IJA member. In this way, fictional displacement decouples the player-subjectivity's violent actions from continuity with the IJA, shielding the foundational narrative. I believe this is the factor that has contoured the overall development of the pseudo-historical genre, if not the Japanese videogame industry at large.³¹ It should come as no surprise, then, that even pseudo-historical games are marked by depictions of supernatural abilities or forces. This form of fictional displacement in the genre is accompanied by a temporal shift into the past or future as well. With a setting based in the *Sengoku* period, these pseudo-historical games can use the unification of Japan as a platform for potential violence; in settings of the historically-determined future, actions are simply predicted figments. While this usage of the past is perhaps riskier than pure fantasy, it is also more in line with the modes of retroactive wondering identified in the Introduction. In this way, then, pseudo-history works as a platform *par excellence* for ludic

³⁰ Interestingly, mainstream American war simulations have been localized and sold in Japan. At present, it is unclear how Japanese players have responded to games set in the Pacific Theater. This is one particularly intriguing avenue for future research.

³¹ There are numerous other Japanese game genres wherein fictional displacement is visible. The Japanese role-playing game (JRPG), perhaps the most representative of Japan's offerings, tend towards being entirely fantastical. Further research is necessary to create typologies of how this genre uses fantasy. Fictional displacement is even evident in more realistic games. The *Ace Combat* series (1992-2015), for example, is a relatively realistic fighter pilot simulation game that occurs within a fictional world very loosely based upon the real one.

action given the prevailing currents of the late 90s and early 2000s.

Ludic Violence and Political Pacifism

Even under fictional displacement—which is, after all, a function of the storyworld—violent games must yet take into account pacifism. As a political and national principle, pacifism has arisen from the aforementioned discourses of war memory. Indeed, “Japanese pacifisms...are closely linked to Japanese victim mentalities and ultimately return to issues of judgmental memory,” that is, the ethical evaluation of the war’s outbreak and individual soldier’s actions during the conflict.³² Though the longer history need not deter us unduly here, pacifism comes from the (in)famous Article IX and the so-called “peace constitution which forever renounces the use or threat of use of force to settle international disputes.”³³ A great deal of scholarship has dealt with Japan’s “one country pacifism” that “was so overwhelming that nearly all the nation’s energy and resources were mobilized exclusively for economic reconstruction and expansion.”³⁴ However, as Japan’s power and prestige grew on the world stage in the 1980s, these policies were replaced by ones that called for a more “actively engaged Japanese pacifism.”³⁵ Even though “neo-conservatives found a way to dislodge pacifist nationalism,” this political clique’s goal was ultimately “to make Japan a world leader that could contribute to world peace as an equal partner.”³⁶ In other words, pacifism remained as a national tenet; debates rage over how best to practice it actively or passively as a global power. There are conservative elements who

³² Seaton, *Japan’s Contested War Memories*, p. 16, 162.

³³ Masaru Tamamoto, “Ambiguous Japan: Japanese National Identity at Century’s End,” in *International Relations Theory and the Asia-Pacific*, ed. G. John Ikenberry and Michael Mastanduno (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), p. 195.

³⁴ Yoichi Funabashi, “Japan and the New World Order,” *Foreign Affairs* 70, no. 5 (1991), p. 61.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

³⁶ Shunichi Takekawa, “Forging Nationalism from Pacifism and Internationalism: A Study of “Asahi” and “Yomiuri’s” New Year’s Day Editorials, 1953-2005,” *Social Science Japan Journal* 10, no. 1 (2007), p. 77.

see a need for remilitarization to defend Japan, or as a means of maintaining peace more proactively. Conversely, there are progressives who have opposed and continue to oppose the Self-Defense Force (SDF), Japan's current (semi-)military force.³⁷ Indeed, even political calls to “normalize” the Japanese military stem from a mixture of active pacifism and desires to fix something perceived as abnormal about Japan's image as a member of the international community.³⁸ Simultaneously, however, the progressive left maintains pacifism as a moral principle. Thus, pacifism as a national principle is not hegemonic in terms of views on its practice.

It is clear, then, that pacifism(s) and war memory have a close relationship. How, then, are we to understand ludic violence against this socio-cultural backdrop? Naturally, violence as a general trope is hardly absent from post-war Japanese media; however, the cultural meanings associated with certain types of aggressive action are doubtless generated through dialogue with war memory, which premediates certain representations. We must, in other words, find a framework for understanding the cultural work that ludic violence may perform. In so doing, I hope to problematize the notion that “violence is a cultural idiom that requires no translation within increasingly transnational entertainment markets.”³⁹ Rather, violence as a cultural idiom depends upon the ideologies of a given culture to have meaning.

³⁷ Richard J. Samuels, *Securing Japan: Tokyo's Grand Strategy and the Future of East Asia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), pp. 192-194.

³⁸ Sabine Frühstück, *Uneasy Warriors: Gender, Memory, and Popular Culture in the Japanese Army* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), p. 184.

³⁹ Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford, and Greig De Peuter, *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture, and Marketing* (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), p. 251.

Towards a Typology of Violence in Gameplay

As noted, violent videogames are hardly a foreign phenomenon in Japan.⁴⁰ Indeed, Shibuya Akiko and Sakamoto Akira found in 2005 that 35 of the 41 games Japanese middle-school children labeled as their favorites contained violence of some kind.⁴¹ However, there is very little scholarship on the cultural meanings associated with such violence at the time of writing. In part, this is due to the general trends within the field. Following the Columbine High School massacre in 1999—the perpetrators of which owned numerous violent videogames—American socio-psychological scholars have heatedly debated whether aggressive ludic acts lead to aggressive actions in real life.⁴² This has spawned at the global level a “vast but inconclusive literature on the effects of violent representations on [sic] television and other media.”⁴³

While these questions are interesting in their own right, I believe they miss the crucial point. How violence affects people seems to me more a function of the various meaningful structures surrounding the violence. Consequently, I propose a three-tiered framework. I believe that first, we need to analyze the content of violent representation through its distinct manifestation in gameplay. Second, we must examine how this violence is framed by the diegesis: how does the story explain the need for violence? Does the narrative legitimize aggression, or demonize it? Finally, and perhaps most importantly, there is the cultural context that encodes certain values into these other two areas. This model allows us to understand the

⁴⁰ As to why games do not simply avoid violence altogether, I can merely conjecture that it has something to do with a convergence of global media standards.

⁴¹ Akiko Shibuya and Akira Sakamoto, "The Quantity and Context of Video Game Violence in Japan: Toward Creating an Ethical Standard," in *Gaming, Simulations, and Society: Research Scope and Perspective*, ed. Rei Shiratori, K. Arai, and F. Kato (Tokyo: Springer, 2005), p. 113.

⁴² For an excellent summation of the four main branches of this debate, see Cynthia Carter, *Violence and the Media*, ed. C. Kay Weaver (Philadelphia, Pa.: Open University Press, 2003), pp. 6-15.

⁴³ Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and De Peuter, *Digital Play*, p. 247.

theoretical effects of violent play as they pertain to greater cultural ideologies, rather than simply psychologizing the player.

Cultural Context	Ritual/Symbolic	Ritual/Symbolic
Diegetic frame	Aggressive (Unjustified)	Defensive (Justified)
Content of Violence	Unprovoked For personal gain Inappropriate emotional response Unnecessary to continue	Retaliatory For protection of others Self-defense (appropriate response) Necessary to continue

Table 1: Ludic Violence

Speaking to the individual content of violent acts, Shibuya and Sakamoto's work on Japan is illuminating. Although they are fundamentally concerned with the aforementioned socio-psychological debate on videogame violence, their content analysis of the medium provides a useful system for categorizing content. Of concern to us here is what reasons games give for their own violence, which the authors broadly divide between "justified" or "unjustified." In the former category, there are four potential patterns that read as justified violent acts when: 1) it is retaliatory or previously provoked; 2) it serves as "protection of others/society;" 3) it is committed in self-defense; and 4) it is necessary to continue the game. Conversely, a violent act is unjustified when: 1) it is committed against a blameless victim; 2) it allows for "personal gain" irrespective of any moral facet; 3) it is an unwarranted emotional response such as rage or terror; and 4) the player consciously chooses to continue the game with it, despite other options for progression.⁴⁴

Crucially, justified violence in the Japanese case is almost exclusively a function of defense. Conversely, aggressive acts are seen as unjustified.⁴⁵ Naturally, the relative merits of a

⁴⁴ Shibuya and Sakamoto, "The Quantity and Context of Video Game Violence in Japan," p. 112, 115.

⁴⁵ Intriguingly, Shibuya and Sakamoto also find that unjustified violence decreased aggression in their respondents.

violent act are contextually-defined. The diegetic frame ascribes either defensive or aggressive overtones to the player-subjectivity's actions within the game text. Thus, the diegetic frame for violence necessarily precedes the content of violence. This point has any possible number of interpretations, but I would argue that it hints at the shadow that the IJA still casts over pacifism. In any case, aggression is demonized and defense tolerated, if not lauded.

This point brings us to the cultural context, or what role certain types of violent representation play within a given culture. I turn here to Henry A. Giroux's discussion of American filmic violence. Speaking to the "culture of violence" within the United States, Giroux argues that there are essentially three types of violence within media, two of which are relevant for this discussion.⁴⁶ The first is "ritualistic:" "utterly banal, predictable, and often stereotypically masculine."⁴⁷ It does not encourage critical thought on the content or reason for violence; rather, it simply reinforces the status quo. In this, ritual violence draws upon a nostalgic, Caucasian imaginary that reinforces racial stereotypes through tropes of victimhood or perpetration. Giroux's second type of violence is "symbolic," which "attempts to connect the visceral and reflective."⁴⁸ If ritualistic violence seeks to obviate any trace of the ideologies that drive it, symbolic violence instead shines a spotlight upon these deeper structures. In other words, its goal is not unthinking pleasure, but rather unearthing more significant insights on "the complex contradictions that shape human agency, the limits of rationality, and the existential issues that tie us to other human beings and a broader social world."⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Giroux's third category is "hyper-real" violence, which disassociates itself with the actuality behind actual violence through an extreme adherence to a realistic aesthetic.

⁴⁷ Henry A. Giroux, "Pulp Fiction and the Culture of Violence," *Harvard Educational Review* 65, no. 2 (1995), p. 301.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 303.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*.

While this model can be applied to any game, Japanese or otherwise, I believe that we can develop it further for the pseudo-historical genre of games. After all, shifting the setting away from strictly historical representation as such does not stop more or less overt intertextual referencing of militarism—for even playing as a soldier subjugating others in a fantasy storyworld surely sits badly with the foundational narrative.

This draws us back to diegetic framing. I argue that violence in pseudo-historical games, even under fictional displacement, is construed as militaristic when it broadly fits Shibuya and Sakamoto's categories of unjustified violence. In this regard, aggressive violence alludes to Japan's past expansionism. In the narrative, it may be interlinked with themes of imperialism, colonialism, or conquest. Militaristic violence also occurs in homosocial settings, thus referencing the male IJA. It is unlikely in the extreme, then, that pseudo-historical games would frame the actions of the player through militaristic violence.

However, there is no reason why the player avatar cannot *oppose* militaristic violence. Indeed, this definition allows for male antagonists who, by means of being (semi-)surrogates for the IJA, reaffirm the reactive pacifism of the Japanese body-subject. More importantly, such an antagonist's violence becomes ritualistic insofar as it reinforces the negative image of the IJA and upholds the foundational narrative. In other words, aggressive violence underscores the status quo, and (somewhat problematically) re-inscribes the peaceful image of the civilian upon the player.

This, in turn, allows us to broadly define the player avatar as the antithesis of militaristic violence. Broadly speaking, we might expect these protagonists to use violence reactively; that is, defensively and in response to some challenge to loved ones or society. While this, too, is a function of the diegetic frame, it directly influences the meaning of gameplay. Thus, we come

full circle. Through fictional displacement, the storyworld becomes fantastically and temporally acceptable as a platform for violence. Through diegetic framing, the player is positioned in such a way as to defeat caricatures of militarism, thereby rendering the violence of the gameplay itself defensive.

Yet, there is an inherent contradiction with using violence against violence, justified or otherwise. Defensive acts may be less problematic thanks to the broad discourse that has come to surround pacifism since the 90s, but they were and are not unambiguously good, either. Simply put, the body-subject still must somehow come to terms with violence as such. I will show in the next chapter how games use certain constructions of gender to conceal this point, but these do not ameliorate the inherent ambiguity.

In fact, this gap between pacifism and defensive acts contains the potential to change the cultural context of violence. If we take post-war Japanese pacifism as the status quo, defensive acts have the potential to take on symbolic meaning that questions the very structure and necessity of this pacifism—mimicking the aforementioned debate over proactive or reactive policy. This symbolic function is borne out via *ludic phronesis*: games provide the player-subjectivity the opportunity to reflect upon their violent actions, and the act of play itself becomes a window into considerations of pacifism. Put another way, the body-subject may come to see defensive violence as an appropriate response to certain situations through the actions of the player-subjectivity. As we shall see in Chapter 3, this contains a powerful transformative potential.

Cultural Context	Ritual	Symbolic (?)
Player-subjectivity and Body-subject	<i>Ludic Phronesis</i>	
Diegetic frame	Aggressive (Unjustified)	Defensive (Justified)
	Antagonist	Protagonist
Content of Violence	Unprovoked For personal gain Inappropriate emotional response Player chose to be aggressive	Retaliatory For protection of others Self-defense (appropriate response) Necessary to continue

Table 2: Japanese Ludic Violence

Needless to say, developers do not always consciously explore this possibility. From the point of view of the profitability threshold, it makes more sense to maintain the status quo. All three of the games I analyze seek to overlook the symbolic potential, instead opting to reassert denunciations of violence in one way or another through diegetic framing. In this regard, they attempt to downplay their transformative potential. However, these efforts are of mixed quality and efficacy. In fact, they are necessarily incomplete within the social context of shifting pacifisms. Intentional or not, symbolic violence does ultimately have an influence on the meanings of a pseudo-historical game text through *ludic phronesis*—and it is here that games take on their transformative potential as cultural technologies.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that games must be read within specific ideo-historical contexts in order to understand their meaning because societal discourses structure *ludic phronesis*. In other words, a game's meaning for players will hinge upon the experiences of the player-subjectivity as understood by the body-subject, which itself is the product of greater ideologies. Moreover, the socio-political background of Japanese action games complicates simulations of WWII—a common genre in the American gaming industry. This is largely due to the composition of Japanese war memory that privileges the civilian experience through

demonizing the IJA. A game featuring a Japanese soldier as the player avatar ultimately raises problematic memories and lowers salability.

Consequently, games have turned to fictional displacement to allow for violence, and to divorce the player-subjectivity's experience from traces of militarism. Nonetheless, pseudo-historical games must also account for intertextual references connecting the player's actions to militaristic violence. Instead, these works juxtapose the player avatar with manifestations of aggression; that is, antagonists who act to subjugate others within homosocial settings. In this instance, militaristic violence is ritual, reinforcing widely-held perceptions of the IJA and reflexively aligning the body-subject with reactive pacifism. Thus, the pseudo-historical genre permits protagonists to use violence in defensive contexts, thereby justifying these acts. Yet, there is an inherent ambiguity in pairing the player with violence of any kind. It is here that defensive violence may take on a symbolic quality, questioning the structure of post-war pacifism.

While we have seen it here in terms of violence, a similar ambiguity manifests itself within gender construction and political positions in pseudo-historical games—the topics of Chapters 2 and 3, respectively. Individual works have any number of means for suppressing their transformative potential, but none can fully extinguish it. This is doubtless a function of the background against which both ludic media and the body-subject arise: the retrospective wondering of the 90s and 2000s. Ultimately, the experiences of the player-subjectivity provide an opportunity to rethink certain topics.

Chapter 2: Militarism and Masculinity in the *Sengoku* Period

In framing the actions of the player avatar and diegetic violence, few vehicles are more powerful than gender. This is perhaps due to gendered nature of various genres. We have already seen that *otome* games target female players. The mainstream pseudo-historical games that I analyze, conversely, are made with a male audience in mind. The diegetic framing of masculinity is all the more powerful of a tool for it.

This particular point is not unique to Japan. Giroux himself notes that ritualistic violence underscores hegemonic forms of racialized masculinity. Accordingly, studies of American games have noted the existence of a “militarized masculinity” within games that “interweaves ingredients that range from shooting and fighting skills to magical spells of destruction, strategic and tactical war games, espionage, and scenarios of exploration and progress.”¹ In other words, the acts of the player avatar are diegetically framed in such a way as to have a ritualistic masculinizing effect upon the body-subject. As Nola Alloway and Pam Gilbert note, “[t]hrough participation in the practices associated with video gaming, boys and young men enter a discursive field within which constructions of hegemonic masculinity dominate.”² While this may often take the more defensive form of “killing enemies and saving (largely inconsequential) females in a macho display,” there is little to prevent the inclusion of offensive violence.³ Put simply, violence makes the man as “ritualistic representations of violence naturalize the narratives that simultaneously reflect, create, and maintain reality.”⁴ In the American cultural

¹ Kline, Dyer-Witford, and De Peuter, *Digital Play*, p. 254.

² Nola Alloway and Pam Gilbert, "Video Game Culture: Playing with Masculinity, Violence, and Pleasure," in *Wired-Up: Young People and the Electronic Media*, ed. Sue Howard (Bristol, Pa., USA: UCL Press, 1998), p. 93.

³ Ewan Kirkland, "Masculinity in Video Games: The Gendered Gameplay of *Silent Hill*," *Camera Obscura*, no. 71 (2009), p. 166.

⁴ Alloway and Gilbert, "Video Game Culture," p. 97.

context, then, masculinity ties together both aggressive and defensive violence.

In Japan, however, “the modern connection between proving oneself as a man and proving this manhood by success in organized killing...seems obsolete.”⁵ This chapter, therefore, explores how two pseudo-historical games attempt to overcome or conceal the ambiguity inherent in violence with a view of masculinity that is itself ambiguous. In a narrative gesture reminiscent of 1990s war film, player violence is justified through these manipulations of gender, which use post-war tenets of masculinity—expressed as a moral imperative to protect—in order to relieve the avatar of culpability. Ambiguity presents in these masculinities in two ways. First, these constructions share some degree of continuity with wartime rhetoric, making them unsafe from the perspective of the foundational narrative. Second, as mentioned above, defensive violence does not necessarily sit well with post-war pacifism(s). I look to *Onimusha* and *Sengoku BASARA*, two games set during the *Sengoku* era (1467-1603) in Japanese history, to demonstrate both the successes and failures of these various strategies. Where the former displays an uneasiness with defensive violence, the latter parodically disrupts the link between men and violence through defensive female characters, even while it dabbles with aggressive-seeming acts. Both remain more safely in the realm of cultural artifacts, however, as they attempt to foreclose the possibility of stable masculinities in the mode they propose.

Gender and Violence in Japanese Media

Although normative salaryman (*sararii man*) masculinity in the post-war period does, as noted above, disrupt the link between violence and maleness, pseudo-historical games can follow the precedent of 1990s Pacific War films. These movies generally sought to “refashion the armed

⁵ Sabine Frühstück, "After Heroism: Must Real Soldiers Die?," in *Recreating Japanese Men*, ed. Sabine Frühstück and Anne Walthall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), p. 92.

forces into one [sic] that Japanese could become *proud* of.”⁶ This involved attempts to exonerate individual members of the war dead by depicting soldiers as victims of the military government, changing them from warmongers into suffering civilians. Crucially, these films “adopt the norms and moral boundaries of the global Anglo-American popular culture,” where “[c]ourage, principle, skills, loyalty, and dedication comprise the backbone of positive moral identity for Hollywood models.”⁷ Sacrifice for, and devotion to, the emperor or nation—examples of actual wartime rhetoric—are largely absent. This dovetails neatly with the post-war normative masculinity of the salaryman. Though certain dynamics of this “male-ness”—devotion to the company, economic progress as a form of national growth, and so on—need not deter us here, Hashimoto’s discussion of cinema relates to the trope of men supporting their families. This role is often described as *daikokubashira*. Literally the central pillar of traditional houses, the metaphor refers to the husband and father as the central support of the entire family.⁸ The association also marks an unspoken division of labor, where “men are...househeads and providers [who require] the support of women as ‘good wives, wise mothers.’”⁹

In cinema, soldiers are redeemed precisely through their devotion to their families. Films imbricate not only the cosmopolitan values of American media, but also localize these notions through normative Japanese masculinity.¹⁰ I raise this point here to argue that the diegetic frame

⁶ Akiko Hashimoto, *The Long Defeat: Cultural Trauma, Memory, and Identity in Japan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 76.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁸ For more on the salaryman, see Ezra F. Vogel, *Japan's New Middle Class*, 3rd ed. (Lanham Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2013/1963).

⁹ James E. Roberson and Nobue Suzuki, "Introduction," in *Men and Masculinities in Contemporary Japan: Dislocating the Salaryman Doxa*, ed. James E. Roberson and Nobue Suzuki (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), p. 8.

¹⁰ This is not to a-historically claim that American and Japanese norms are mutually exclusive or distinct entities, but rather to note that there are local meanings associated with global tropes of masculinity.

for the avatar in pseudo-historical games broadly conforms to the form of masculinity found in 1990s war films. If we take play to be a performative act constrained and shaped by the diegetic frame, then the trope of protecting the family as a male avatar creates a logical reason for non-militaristic violence. In other words, this construction of masculinity establishes a moral imperative as a man to defend others. Moreover, it gives the player-subjectivity a motivation irrespective of expansionist imperialism—a point underscored if the player avatar is juxtaposed to some paragon of militarism. In theory, this form of masculinity does not invoke memories of the IJA in the acts of the body-subject. In terms of avoiding militarism, the samurai is a figure *par excellence* for use in ludic media. Though the aesthetics of *bushidō* were used to justify Japanese historical expansionism, at present the samurai has become something of a floating signifier.¹¹ Recasting this “symbol of Japanese masculinity and national identity....[and a] powerful, if wholly overdetermined icon[,]” in terms of *daikokubashira* allows a protective male figure to subvert or oppose themes of militarism.¹² Pseudo-historical games, then, interweave elements from the pre-modern cultural imaginary with a form of post- or late-modern masculinity in a way that abridges certain memories of the IJA.

However, as with defensive violence, there is a certain degree of ambiguity within this composition. Although “[t]he wartime generation had a generally weaker emotional attachment to family life compared to now,” the connection between fighting and the family was present nonetheless.¹³ Dying for the nation was not entirely divorced from familialism—not to mention the overriding presence of the nation-as-family metaphor in the rhetoric of the Greater East Asia

¹¹ Michele M. Mason, "Empowering the Would-Be Warrior: Bushidō and the Gendered Bodies of the Japanese Nation," in *Recreating Japanese Men*, ed. Sabine Frühstück and Anne Walthall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), pp. 71-76.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 87.

¹³ Hashimoto, *The Long Defeat*, p. 74.

Co-Prosperity Sphere. Thus, masculinity within games that defines itself through protective violence does not constitute a clean break from past discourses of militarism. As such, the specific constructions of masculinity in these games are imperfect, and open to forms of gender play. Furthermore, even defensive violence does not necessarily sit well with post-war conceptions of pacifist nationhood.¹⁴ Games may strive to align the player avatar with civilians, but the player-subjectivity's acts are themselves violent. Many games leave the distance between these two points untouched, but the gap exists nonetheless.

In the remainder of this paper, I examine two games that each approach this ambiguity in different ways. *Onimusha* is uncomfortable with defensive violence. *Sengoku BASARA*, on the other hand, questions the pairing of men and violence altogether.

***Onimusha*: Plot and Game Structure**

Onimusha was the joint-creation of director Takeuchi Jun and producer Inafune Keiji. Both men were Capcom veterans when they created the game, having gained valuable experience on the survival-horror franchise *Baio Hazādo* (1996-present).¹⁵ While *Baio Hazādo* is not a pseudo-historical game, insofar as it deals almost exclusively with scientifically-created zombies, elements of its genre do seep into *Onimusha*, most notably in the grotesque design of the player's enemies.

Onimusha's plot revolves around Akechi Samanosuke, the player avatar, and his battles against the *genma*, a fictional species of demon. The game opens with the battle of Okehazama in 1560, where the forces of Oda Nobunaga (1534-1582) defeated the armies of the Imagawa

¹⁴ For more on the same as it pertains to the Self-Defense Force (SDF), see Sabine Frühstück, *Uneasy Warriors: Gender, Memory, and Popular Culture in the Japanese Army* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007).

¹⁵ For reasons related to intellectual copyright, this series is known as *Resident Evil* in North American and European markets.

Yoshimoto (1519-1560).¹⁶ In *Onimusha*, however, Oda dies in this battle, and is resurrected by the *genma*. One year later, these demons kidnap Princess Yuki, Samanosuke's cousin, at Inabayama Castle. Alongside Kaede, a kunoichi (female ninja), Samanosuke rushes to Yuki's defense, only to be defeated by a large demon. While unconscious, he communes with twelve *oni*—Japanese ogres—who give him a gauntlet with the power to absorb the souls of defeated *genma*. Thus armed, Samanosuke sets out into the castle. He encounters Guildenstern, the *genma* scientist who reanimated Oda, and learns that Yuki is intended as a blood sacrifice to give the warlord strength enough to destroy the Saitō clan. Samanosuke then finds Yumemaru, a peasant boy whom Yuki adopted, only to see the orphan taken by the *genma*. The demons intend to kill Yumemaru before Yuki, and so drive her into a despair that will make her blood all the more powerful.

Samanosuke ventures into the world of the *genma*, where he confronts their king, Fortinbras. Defeating the snake-like demon, the samurai frees Yuki and Yumemaru, and all flee the degrading hall. However, Fortinbras revives sufficiently to grab Samanosuke, who suddenly transforms into a mystical *onimusha* (*oni* warrior) and kills the king once and for all. As Samanosuke transforms back into a human, he sees Oda in front of him, ending the game on an ambiguous note.

This story, for the most part, comes in the form of cutscenes (kernels), or short films with which the player cannot interact. These cutscenes also contextualize play by highlighting player goals. In this sense, interactivity is quite prescribed, as the player must complete each goal in order to unlock the next kernel. Within the satellites, the gameplay in *Onimusha* is composed of

¹⁶ Jeroen Pieter Lamers, *Japonius Tyrannus: The Japanese Warlord Oda Nobunaga Reconsidered* (Leiden: Hotei Publishing, 2000), p. 29.

two basic functions: attacking and defending. Each has two options. When attacking, the player may use a conventional or a magical assault. The latter are specific to the four otherworldly weapons found throughout the game, and deal more damage but use up a magic gauge in the process, and cannot be used ad infinitum. The player may also block enemy onslaughts, or dodge them. Given the relative strength of the enemies, as well as encounters that pit Samanosuke against numerous foes simultaneously, the player must use both offensive and defensive techniques. Indeed, charging in heedlessly will all too often result in a game over. Enemies almost never go down with a single attack. Rather, it takes at least three hits to vanquish even lower level foes. There is one exception to this, an attack that will result in the instant death of almost all enemies. However, in this case, the player must wait for the enemy to attack, dodge, and then counterstrike. Operationally speaking, this requires split-second timing. However, to accomplish so difficult a move yields greater rewards and, arguably, greater pleasure.

From the perspective of procedural rhetoric, this feature demonstrates the game's ambivalence towards offensive violence: gameplay asks the player-subjectivity not only to defend, but to avoid striking first as well. Moreover, the game also shows the consequences of the player's actions through displays of blood when Samanosuke hits an enemy. If we find this ambivalence within gameplay itself, we must then question how the diegetic frame contextualizes violence.

Masculinity beyond Militarism, beyond Violence

The fictional displacement in *Onimusha* occurs in the opening scene.¹⁷ By killing Oda at Okehazama, the battle that arguably started his rise to prominence, the game demarcates its

¹⁷ Unless otherwise notated, the following quotations are from Jun Takeuchi, "Onimusha," (Tokyo: Capcom, 2001). Passage translations are my own.

storyworld as fantasy. In this moment, the game divorces itself from any actual historical concerns.

Oda—who never speaks—is also constructed as a paragon of militarism, and thus the game’s antagonist. This point merits remark, insofar as there is a tendency to paint the warlord in unflattering ways throughout pseudo-historical games set during the *sengoku* era. Although *Onimusha* is perhaps the most overt, numerous other series also have very ambivalent portrayals of Oda.¹⁸ In part, this is doubtless due to his actual conduct: in historical and popular discourse, he is often seen as a “cruel and callous brute,” an impression his actual martial prowess and attacks on religious groups do little to ease.¹⁹ Of equal importance is that he was a military leader who achieved many of his goals through violence, as opposed to Toyotomi Hideyoshi (c. 1536-1598) and Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543-1616), both of whom were more partial to diplomacy. Oda’s character in media is therefore easily premediated by wartime leaders. In other words, it is a relatively simple matter to draw ties between militarism and the warlord.

In *Onimusha*, this occurs through his portrayal as ambitious to the point of murder, and in terms of his masculinity. Oda is only ever seen surrounded by samurai—that is, in militaristic homosocial situations—or alone. He is divided from any hint of family, and willing to ignore all manner of social mores in order to achieve his goals. He is a caricature of the soldier from a post-war perspective: aggressive in ambition, violent in method, and uncaring in terms of the family. Note that his and the *genma*’s plan entails not only the destruction of a female body, but also the bond between sister and brother. He is the opposite of *daikokubashira* masculinity, cast in militaristic terms—and so ritually cements his position as an emblem of the IJA.

¹⁸ Most notably, both the *Sengoku Musō* (2004-present) and *Sengoku BASARA* (2005-present) exhibit this tendency.

¹⁹ Lamers, *Japonius Tyrannus*, p. 11.

By contrast, Samanosuke is a samurai and *daikokubashira* both. While he is seen fighting in the opening scene, he is also portrayed racing back to Inabayama Castle to save Yuki. The letter that brought him there displays after the cinematics, and is read aloud in the princess's voice. This construes the player avatar's actions as a "save-the-princess" narrative—a diegetic frame that justifies fighting. In other words, the violence is from its inception defensive and retaliatory. *Onimusha* is also not a romantic narrative. The game never clarifies the nature of Samanosuke and Kaede's relationship, nor if the samurai's bond with Yuki is more than strictly familial. Yumemaru's inclusion renders the foursome into something akin to a family unit, and Samanosuke into an older brother.²⁰ This role is evident in a scene halfway through the game where the protagonist, the boy, and Kaede are together. Samanosuke delivers a speech to calm Yumemaru whilst giving him a hug. The samurai condemns *Sengoku* Japan as a place where "the strong act as they please."²¹ He speaks of his own travels abroad, and bids Yumemaru do likewise insofar as "[there] lies freedom, [there] lies hope."²² He ends by again deriding the internal struggles between fiefdoms, saying that one day such infighting will seem little more than dull. Here, *daikokubashira* is imbricated with post-war pacifism. The speech casts Samanosuke's conflict with Oda in ideological terms: tyranny of the strong versus freedom for all. As representative of the latter, the player avatar steps into the heroic role as a protector of women and children and a fighter against oppression and despotism. Thus, the plot gives Samanosuke and the player-subjectivity morally sound reasons to fight.

However, Samanosuke is not a father figure per se. That there is so great a sense of ambivalence in the family unit bespeaks as much. It is the *genma*, on Oda's behest, who wrench

²⁰ "Onīchan!"

²¹ "Ima no yo wa tsuyoi mono dake ga nosabariyagatte."

²² "Jiyū ga aru [,]kibō ga aru."

the four apart; it is Samanosuke who then brings them back together in the game's ending. Yet their reunion is fleeting, as Samanosuke is left behind by the fleeing Kaede, Yuki, and Yumemaru. Alone, the samurai transforms into a powerful creature, the *onimusha*, but in that moment becomes a being much like Oda: warlike and otherworldly. The final scene, when the two stare at one another over Fortinbras' corpse, implies a certain parity in this vein. Thus, while the civilians flee, Samanosuke is left behind as an embodiment of violence, and, perhaps, militarism. The game's epilogue underscores this division between civilian and fighter. Where Yuki and Yumemaru escape the oppressive confines of Japan, Kaede searches in vain for Samanosuke and eventually dies in a battle fourteen years later. The samurai's fate is left unknown, though a short scene after the credits implies that he has survived. This turn, which sees the civilians with happy endings and the warriors with ambiguous ones, echoes the last scene of Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai*: "We've lost yet again. With their land, the farmers are the victors...not us."²³

This similarity is far from coincidental, as "[d]isturbed by the fanatical militarism present in Japan during World War II...Kurosawa aimed to reshape Japanese society for ideals of individual autonomy."²⁴ *Onimusha* follows the director's example through imagining peace as the realm of civilians—the (non-combatant) women and children, but not of grown martial men. In this regard, the game compartmentalizes violent play within the world of the samurai, while ascribing normalcy and, indeed, pacifism itself, to civilian sites outside of the game. Indeed, the player-subjectivity's experience occurs exclusively in abnormal spaces, relegating defensive violence to the realm of aberration. I would argue that this imagining of peace and conflict that

²³ Akira Kurosawa, "The Seven Samurai," (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970).

²⁴ Rie Karatsu, "Between Comedy and Kitsch: Kitano's Zatoichi and Kurosawa's Traditions of 'Jidaigeki' comedies," *Scope: An Online Journal of Film and TV Studies* 6 (2006), p. 5.

so strictly divides the civilian from the bellicose further underscores the denunciation of the game's ending. In other words, the game circumvents the symbolic potential of Samanosuke's actions by placing it within violent settings. This insulates everyday spaces from justified violence, and firmly closes any doors that the symbolic violence may have opened.

In the end, *Onimusha* is uncomfortable with its own use of violence. Even while it demonizes Oda and give numerous protective reasons for Samanosuke to fight, it delivers a general critique of violence in its dénouement. The narrative positions the player avatar in such a way that allows for violent play, but quietly denounces the same in the conclusion. Though the game consciously separates representations of militarism from violence through masculinity in its diegetic frame, the narrative ultimately conflates the two. In the end, the game seems to decry violence as a trait of masculinity, instead putting forth the notion that education and cosmopolitanism—as embodied in Yumemaru—are the answers for the future.

***Sengoku BASARA*: Plot and Game Structure**

Whereas *Onimusha* is studied in its treatment of militarism, masculinity and violence, *Sengoku BASARA* instead traffics in excess. Interestingly, the game's production team also shares in the *Baio Hazādo* lineage: while there is little public information on director Yamamoto Makoto, Kobayashi Hiroyuki, the producer, was also involved in developing the horror game. Yet, *BASARA*'s design similarities with both *Baio Hazādo* and *Onimusha* end there. *BASARA* does not feature a central narrative, but rather a series of numerous battle stages that the player moves through as one of sixteen possible avatars.²⁵ Each seeks to unify the country.²⁶ All characters have brief cutscenes introducing and concluding their storylines, but the actual order

²⁵ Unless otherwise notated, the following quotations are from Makoto Yamamoto, and Akitoshi Yokoyama, "Sengoku Basara," (Tokyo: Capcom, 2005). Passage translations are my own.

²⁶ "Tenka tōitsu."

of the battles and opponents is largely left to the player. There is no single correct way to unify Japan.

Thus, the greater part of the game is satellites. Gameplay consists of fighting through waves of enemies. In addition to a basic attack, the player also has a supernatural ability that slows time for other characters, and renders the player avatar virtually invincible. The number of felled foes is displayed in the lower corner of the screen under the heading “people cut down,” and it is common to kill at least one hundred non-player characters (NPCs) during a single stage.²⁷ The vast majority are commonplace soldiers, who are significantly less powerful than the player avatar. They put up very little fight, and have relatively little health. They are also almost entirely identical in appearance, regardless of their faction. Both the Takeda and Oda cavalry troops have the same bodily proportions and facial features, and differ only the color of their clothing. Furthermore, none of the particular classes are named, nor do they bleed when attacked. NPCs are thus positioned as an unindividuated, semi-human mass.

The game’s website extolls the “feeling of exhilaration that comes with defeating hundreds—even thousands—of enemies on your own.”²⁸ As is evident here, *BASARA* is unreservedly a power fantasy, a point that is borne out through the game’s procedural rhetoric. The player’s martial prowess becomes the criterion for evaluation: felling as many enemies as possible is the only way to raise the level of any given player avatar. Troublingly, lower level enemies whose commander has been defeated will cower in fear of the player avatar. Killing these downed foes will increase the player’s final score. When compared with *Onimusha*, then, *BASARA* seems almost disturbingly at ease with associating its storyworld with violence—and

²⁷ “*Hito kiri.*”

²⁸ “Sengoku Basara: Basaragi,” CAPCOM CO., LTD, <http://www.capcom.co.jp/sengoku/>.

semi-aggressive violence at that.

An Excess of Violence and Non-normative Gender

The keys to understanding this difference lies with excess to the point of parody—something hinted at in the game's title. First, the game follows *Onimusha* insofar as it divides spaces of peace from those of war. The player-subjectivity is never given the opportunity to attack actual innocents; rather, play only occurs on fields of battle. When civilians are implicated in the brief narrative sections, they are depicted as victims whose lives are thrown into disarray because of the samurai. Peace exists as a possibility beyond the game itself—something hinted at in the future. Second, the principle of fictional displacement is soundly at work within *BASARA*. Though the aforementioned website does draw attention to the historical component, in actuality the game delves so deeply into fantasy that this claim rings untrue. This can be seen in its basic structure. While it is possible to bring Japan under Tokugawa rule, Ieyasu himself is not a playable character. Similarly, it is possible to fully unify the country with Oda—something that the warlord perished too soon to actually accomplish. Lesser warlords, such as Takeda Shingen (1521-1573) or Date Masamune (1567-1636), can also be crowned leaders of Japan, as can completely fictional characters such as Itsuki, a twelve-year old girl from the north who wields an enormous hammer. These alternate histories pose interesting questions—would Japan have been different with a female ruler?—that the game studiously avoids. Rather, completing one character's timeline simply resets the game to point zero, before unification.

Furthermore, the game is anachronistic in its diegetic frame. Honda Tadakatsu (1548-1610), one of Tokugawa's finest generals, wears a robotic suit of armor. Nō-hime, Oda's wife, wields a pair of revolvers, and takes to the battlefield in a low-cut dress. Zabī, a foreign monk and the progenitor of his own religion, fights with two cannon strapped to his arms whilst

spouting nonsense about “love.” Though these are the more eccentric characters, the point is clear: within the confines of the game, literally anyone can unify Japan. It is almost bitingly parodic, mocking conceptions of history as sacred and, more importantly, the sanctity of the samurai. The storyworld is highly-contained, consciously a-historical, and fantastical. It does not ask the body-subject to reflect on their actions by underscoring its own game-ness. Just as there are few consequences to victory, so too are there few associated with violence. By means of its excesses, then, *BASARA* does not see much need to comment on violence, defensive or otherwise.

That being said, the game does shy away from militaristic violence. First, the targets of aggression are always soldiers and Japanese, with the exception of the comical Zabī. In this sense, the setting in the *sengoku* period neatly sidesteps later ideas of expansionism by delimiting the subjugation to the main islands of Japan.²⁹ This goal is partially justified as the pursuit of unification, and, presumably, the relative peace of the Edo period. Moreover, the game begins *in media res*, speaking little about the origins of the myriad historical rivalries it features. In this sense, history as a setting blurs who is acting aggressively, and who defensively. Finally, as we will see, the game de-masculinizes the spaces of conflict by means of including female characters. In other words, war is rendered self-consciously heterosocial. In these ways, then, *BASARA* blurs the boundaries of aggressive and defensive violence through a mixture of wild visual extravagance and carefully avoiding militaristic violence.

Additionally, there is a certain degree of ambiguity surrounding Oda’s character. Indeed, masculinity of Samanosuke’s kind can be found in *BASARA*’s depiction of the warlord. After he is selected as the player avatar, the scenes depicting Oda show him with his wife, and his

²⁹ Notably, neither Okinawa nor Hokkaido are included in the game map.

attendant Mori Ranmaru (1565-1582), here portrayed as a young boy. Once again, we see a form of family surrounding the samurai. Unlike his representation in *Onimusha*, Oda appears here as a father figure. As emblematic of *daikokubashira* masculinity, these visual and narrative conceits soften the warlord, thus partially divorcing him from the theme of militarism. In turn, this move allows Oda to become a playable avatar.

Yet the game puts a fair amount of distance between the player and Oda. In *BASARA*'s opening cutscene, for example, a number of characters race towards a castle which is suddenly rent apart by a giant Oda with glowing red eyes and wreathed in flame. Similarly, upon picking him as a player avatar, the warlord appears seated on a throne behind a row of human skulls. His appearance, too, is almost demonic. His helmet has a faceplate with two jagged horns extending from either side, and his red mantle flutters behind him like wings. In the final cutscene, Oda proclaims his desire to extend his rule from Japan to the rest of the world. These lines are accompanied by images of him menacingly hovering in the atmosphere above earth. The representations sustain his historical image of brutality and ambition. They also underscore the essential difference between Samanosuke and Oda: the former uses violence to defend others, while the latter uses it for subjugation. A pseudo-family may take the warlord out of a homosocial, militaristic setting in *BASARA*, but his goals and ambitions persist. In this way, the game renders Oda an object of criticism, and, ultimately, demonizes him. In this depiction, then, we find much of the same ambivalence as in *Onimusha*. Oda is playable, but not likeable—an iconic figure of militaristic masculinity that cannot, ultimately, be a relatable hero.

In keeping with themes of parody, however, *BASARA* moves one step further. Even while it problematizes the link between militarism and masculinity through Oda, it also questions whether protective violence is the sole purview of men. It suggests that women, too, might turn

to such means should the need arise. Itsuki is the prime example of this. The girl enters the fray because she has a vision of her village's crop of rice burning on account of the war. A shining line beams down, and an ethereal voice—presumably a goddess—informs Itsuki that she will be given a great power in order to stop the war. She is awoken from her dream when a giant hammer comes flying down from the sky. With this weapon in hand, she comes to lead the peasant revolts. However, Itsuki's turn to violence is meant to bring about peace from its outset, unlike the samurai whose motivations include lust for power and various grudges. As it is provoked by the samurai, her choice to take up violence is reactive, rather than aggressive. That her weapon references the *uchide-no-kozuchi*, a legendary hammer that has certain wish-granting properties, bears witness to the generative element of her violence, rather than the destructive. Itsuki's end goals are pacifist. This point is particularly evident in her conclusion, where she runs through the same rice paddies, and, realizing she no longer has need of it, tosses her weapon into the air. Quite literally, Itsuki throws away violence once her purpose has been achieved. Her actions, then, are both defensive in that they protect her village, and justifiable in that they lead to peace. In this way, Itsuki is the ideal player avatar. Through her gender, she has few ties to historical militarism thematically; through her aims, she marries defensive violence with peace. By destabilizing the tie between masculinity and protective violence, *BASARA*'s female characters, like Itsuki, cement the option of defensive violence for femininities.

It would a mistake, however, to see this as a particularly nuanced or feminist text. While on the one hand, these defensive femininities do raise questions of gender, the constructs themselves seem to play a parodic part. Put another way, their inclusion highlights the game's ridiculousness, rather than the frailty of masculinity. Moreover, each of the female characters is clearly conceived of with a male audience in mind, be it in terms of revealing clothing or camera

angles that clearly objectify their figures. Each also has a protective agenda. Itsuki's works to save her village, whereas Nō-hime and Matsu—Maeda Toshii's wife—take to the battlefield to keep their respective husbands safe. Kasuga, a female ninja romantically attached to Uesugi Kenshin, likewise acts as a protector. While these women do represent a break from masculinized violence, they are simultaneously the targets of another form of gender stereotyping that sees women resorting to violence only in extreme situations. Whereas the game sees men aggressively advancing their own agendas, be it a search for power or revenge, women can only resort to defensive violence when their loved ones or homes are threatened. In a sense, gender here acts as a softening feature, much as Oda's family does: women are paired with tropes of defensive violence to downplay intertextual references to militarism. While this is novel in certain regards, it also broadly fits into our understanding of pseudo-historical games as gendered products.

In sum, *BASARA* moves far into fantastical territory in its excess and fictional displacement, ultimately emphasizing its own game-ness and lack of consequences as it basks in general violence. On the one hand, it conforms to the selfsame ambivalence found in *Onimusha*'s treatment of Samanosuke. On the other hand, however, it imagines a link between femininity, protective violence, and civilians through Itsuki. This undermines fighting as a male phenomenon, thus severing links with themes of militarism in history. However, while the game plays with gender stereotypes for these purposes, it does not actually subvert them. Rather, it parodies constructions of gender based upon defensive violence, and so undercuts the stability of protective masculinities.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that the conditions of war memory and pacifistic

nationhood have led to a phenomenon in pseudo-historical videogames that pairs masculinity with protection. Against male antagonists, who use aggressive violence—ritually cementing their status as emblems of the IJA—protagonists instead use defensive violence through an unstable relationship with tropes of protection. The masculinity of these avatars serves as a platform for the logical opposition of militarism. Nonetheless, as we have seen with *Onimusha*, this construction is tenuous. Although the game’s defensive violence has symbolic potential, its narrative works to compartmentalize violence within abnormal spaces, and quietly denounces all violence in its dénouement. *Sengoku BASARA*, on the other hand, uses a mixture of excess and gender play to disassociate potentially aggressive violence from militarism. In a way, it decenters men from the military and the tropes of samurai; in another way, it introduces new, problematic constructions of femininity to the mix. Ultimately, both games broadly conform to our model of videogame violence, but through drastically different strategies.

In closing, I wish to note that *Onimusha* and *Sengoku BASARA* are in dialogue with greater societal questions related to violence and pacifism. Masculinity, militarism, and nation are deeply interlinked within the foundational narrative: Hirohito, as a representative of the Japanese nation, became the “docile female who unconditionally accept[ed] the United States’ desire for self-assurance.”³⁰ Where the pre-war period saw masculinity articulated through nationalistic militarism, the post-war period instead looked to pacifism and economic development. In this period, violence became metaphoric—the purview of embattled companies and salarymen—and largely disconnected from masculinity. On the one hand, this conventional take on normative masculinity remains in both games. *Onimusha* sings quiet praise for pacifist masculinity, and *BASARA*’s excess offers a parodic take on the violence of the samurai. While

³⁰ Igarashi, “The Bomb, Hirohito and History,” p. 273.

both games depict tropes of *daikokubashira* as working in tandem with violence, neither quite naturalizes the violent acts of male protectors. In this sense, both games bear the mark of pacifist nationhood.

Onimusha and *BASARA* are very much cultural artifacts, reflecting the specific ambiguities of the so-called lost decade. While the questions they pose hint at greater societal changes—the potential shape of post-post war Japan—both consciously shy away from any definitive answers. They underscore the status quo in slightly different manners, and maintain a state of wondering in so doing.

Chapter 3: The Historico-Political Landscape of *Metal Gear Solid*

If games may comment upon gender constructions, then *ludic phronesis* also invites the player-subjectivity to participate in various political discourses.¹ This capacity is doubly remarkable in Japan's case, where the political spectrum is divided less by social issues (as in the United States) than by the clashing of historical myths surrounding World War II and the associated issue of rearmament.² As we have seen, games can be unintentionally transformative due to symbolic violence. How, then, do they relate to the politicized myths of war memory? In answering this question, I devote this chapter to evaluating *Metal Gear Solid*. Kojima Hideo, the game's producer and director, worked on no less than five other major Konami IPs before starting the project that would win him international acclaim. In spite of the game and Kojima's stature within player communities, *Metal Gear* itself has caught the attention of Japanese and Euro-American academics only for its pedagogical value, and as a design benchmark for industry insiders.³ The political implications of the plot, where America's military-industrial complex pursues global hegemony through advanced nuclear weaponry, have thus far gone untouched.

As a story, *Metal Gear* draws upon three conflicting Japanese historico-political myths, in Bell's sense: the moral pacifism of the progressives, the forgetfulness of the center, and the selective memory of the nationalists. I argue that this patchwork does not seek to intentionally intertwine disparate threads of political thought, but rather reflects the deeply fragmented

¹ Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).

² Shogo Suzuki, "The Rise of the Chinese 'Other' in Japan's Construction of Identity: Is China a Focal Point of Japanese Nationalism?," *The Pacific Review* 28, no. 1 (2015), p. 99.

³ See, for example, Jim Bizzocchi, "The Role of Narrative in Educational Games and Simulations," in *Educational Gameplay and Simulation Environments* (Hershey: IGI Global, 2010) and David Freeman, "Creating Emotion in Games: The Craft and Art of Emotioneering," *Computers in Entertainment (CIE)* 2, no. 3 (2004).

landscape of Japanese war memory. As a game, *Metal Gear* wavers between progressive and nationalistic sensibilities. In places, it encourages non-violent gameplay; in others, it coerces the player-subjectivity into killing fictional enemies. The latter depends upon a moral utilitarianism to justify defensive violence, which itself feeds into nationalistic discourse. Through this, the game ultimately undercuts the logic of the very political position it seeks to defend—and in so doing, acts as a closed circuit drawing together the very ends of the political spectrum.

Interstices of Politics and Past: War Memory

A game like *Metal Gear* derives its transformative potential because it is a “technology of memory...through which memories are shared, produced, and given meaning.”⁴ This is crucial precisely because of the intimate relationship between war memory and political positions.

While I have used centrist conceptions of the war in my analysis thus far, I now examine the fringes as well—for if we are to understand how a technology of memory acts upon the political subjectivity of the player, we must first examine what disparate historical discourses surround the body-subject.

As mentioned above, memories of WWII remain deeply divided. Nonetheless, Japan’s mythscape contains three basic myths, each of which is attached to a political position. “Judgmental war memory”—the ethical evaluation of the war’s outbreak and individual soldier’s actions—creates difference among these three points.⁵ These are: 1) Japan’s relationship with the U.S.; 2) the ethicality of the war; and 3) memories of the wartime IJA.

Underlying all is the aforementioned “foundational narrative.” This amputation of militarism from the Japanese nationhood(s) necessarily repressed memories of soldiers and the

⁴ Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the Aids Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 9.

⁵ Seaton, *Japan's Contested War Memories*, p. 16.

war dead, who were sealed behind the bomb that “has come to metonymically represent all memories of the war.”⁶ The nationalization of the nuclear attack narrative further led to “the perception that ordinary Japanese people had been the passive victims of historical conditions.”⁷ This sense of victimhood allowed the U.S. to take on a role as “a benevolent American power...[that] rescues Japan from the brink of its own self-destruction.”⁸ From this arose the most representative political viewpoint in Japan today: the “progressive-leaning group.”⁹ This occupies a central position in Japan’s political spectrum.¹⁰ It continues to support alliance with Washington D.C., and is broadly pro-U.S.¹¹ On the other hand, “progressives,” whose lineage lies with pre- and post-war leftist and democratic movements, have come to see “the United States [as] a particularly dangerous bully that must be kept at great distance, for fear that Japan will become entangled in American [military] adventures.”¹² In this sense, they reject the foundational narrative of U.S. salvation. At the other end of the spectrum, the nationalists share in this wariness, but instead worry about America’s symbolic “castration” of Japan.¹³ They vocalize this by attempting to “build an independent, full-spectrum military that could use force,” and are less averse to seeking the nuclear deterrent to bolster Japan’s strength as a nation.¹⁴ Naturally, they are alone in this: progressives and the central progressive-leaning group

⁶ Igarashi, "The Bomb, Hirohito, and History.", p. 288.

⁷ Lisa Yoneyama, *Hiroshima Traces: Time, Space, and the Dialectics of Memory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 11.

⁸ Igarashi, "The Bomb, Hirohito, and History," p. 280.

⁹ Seaton, *Japan's Contested War Memories*, p. 21.

¹⁰ Seaton also speaks of the “conservatives” as another viewpoint hovering around center. Similar to the progressive-leaning group in quasi-pacifism and a pro U.S. stance, they believe that the war was justifiable given the historical circumstances. However, as this perspective represents Japan’s political elite, it falls outside the scope of my analysis.

¹¹ Samuels, *Securing Japan*, pp. 111, 124-131.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 111.

¹³ Suzuki, "The Rise of the Chinese ‘Other’," pp. 101-103.

¹⁴ Samuels, *Securing Japan*, p. 112.

abhor atomic weapons.

In terms of the ethicality of the war, the progressive-leaning group decries the conflict as immoral, and now hold to a (quasi-) moral pacifism. However, they do not necessarily consider civilian culpability in doing so. Instead, they allow the mass amnesia of the foundational narrative to cover the war period. While the “progressives” also hold closely to pacifism as a principle of national security and, indeed, morality, they break from the centrists in how history should be remembered.¹⁵ The progressives demand that Japan recall the entirety of its imperialism, from civilian support to Japan’s aggressive actions against the Asian mainland. They find pride in the moral strength to remember such a past. The “nationalists” also seek to remember the war but in a very different way. Their view is that Japan’s action on the continent was one of liberation, to free Asia from Western colonialism.¹⁶ To them, victimhood is weakness; the war effort should be lauded, not forgotten.

The conduct and associated memories of the IJA are another point of major contention among the three groups. The nationalists deploy moral utilitarianism to exonerate the soldiers of their crimes. The act of fighting Western imperialism in Asia was just, and therefore every battle fought—no matter how bloody or depraved—was justified. The progressive-leaning group acknowledges the IJA as war criminals, but more as a scapegoat for their own sense of responsibility. Consequently, they either repress memories of the IJA, or remember them in such a way as to maneuver “around the core ideological issue of Japanese war responsibility.”¹⁷

Progressives face IJA atrocities throughout the Pacific head on. They use a moral absolutism,

¹⁵ Seaton, *Japan's Contested War Memories*, pp. 19-20.

¹⁶ I use the term “West” here to indicate that, although certain European nations did have real territorial possessions in Asia, the nationalist rhetoric deals more with a semi-imaginary unity that Japan defined itself against.

¹⁷ Seaton, *Japan's Contested War Memories*, p. 22.

which holds that each individual action must be considered by its own ethical merits.

Consequently, every soldier (and civilian) ought to be judged based on what they did, rather than as gears within a larger machine.

Media representations of the war also reflect this divide. The notion of resisting Euro-America domination and “saving” those oppressed by Western imperial powers pervades nationalist works. The centrist position, on the other hand, either represses memories of the IJA en masse or attempts to redeem individual soldiers through post-war values. This was particularly clear during efforts in the films mentioned in Chapter 2, which typically involved casting IJA members as victims of the military government, changing them from warmongers into suffering civilians. Thus, centrist narratives tend towards the “victim-hero,” a civilian whose maltreatment at the hands of the military clique serves to “avoid or marginalize issues of war responsibility.”¹⁸ Progressive media, conversely, often comes in the form of documentaries featuring ex-soldiers in their bid to remember the Pacific War.¹⁹ In other words, the progressives remember in shame, the center forgets or represses, and the nationalists memorialize with pride.

As summarized in the following chart, we can trace three nexuses of politics and memory in the discourses surrounding the body-subject of the Japanese player.²⁰ These can be expressed in three questions. The first question addresses how the U.S. is viewed. Is it a staunch ally, or a threatening bully? The second question deals with how the IJA are portrayed: were these righteous heroes, or violent villains? The final question considers the ethicality of the war. Was it a rapacious Japanese campaign, unjustifiable by any moral absolutism, or a reasonable conflict—

¹⁸ Seaton, *Japan's Contested War Memories*, p. 138.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

²⁰ I have oversimplified the issues in this chart. However, as the views of these three positions are complex and often overlap, the chart serves to clarify the key points of the following discussion.

by utilitarian standards—to free Asia of Western influence?²¹ With this in mind, I now turn to considering how *Metal Gear Solid* answers these questions.

	Progressive	Progressive-Leaning	Nationalist
U.S.	Bully	Ally	Bully
Memories of IJA	Villains	Villains	Heroes
Ethicality of the War	Unethical (moral absolutism)	Unethical	Ethical (moral utilitarianism)

Table 3: Historico-political positions

Metal Gear Solid: Plot and Game Structure

Let us begin with an overview of the game’s plot; that is, the kernels.²² Set in 2005, the player steps into the role of Solid Snake, a U.S. operative sent to a nuclear waste disposal facility on an island in Alaska. There, his former unit, FOXHOUND—an elite corps of American super-soldiers—has taken two hostages in a terrorist action: the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) chief and the president of ArmsTech, a fictional defense contractor. FOXHOUND cryptically demands the remains of a Cold War era super-soldier named Big Boss as their condition for surrendering. Snake’s mission is to infiltrate the island, rescue the DARPA and ArmTech heads, and ascertain whether or not FOXHOUND can launch a nuclear strike as they threaten. Upon finding the captives, Snake learns that the complex is a facade for a nuclear weapons development lab. The DARPA chief and ArmsTech president had come to watch tests of a new “Metal Gear”—a walking nuclear tank codenamed REX.²³ Both have revealed to

²¹ For more on differences between positions, see Yoshio Sugimoto, "Nation and Nationalism in Contemporary Japan," in *The Sage Handbook of Nations and Nationalism*, ed. Gerard Delanty and Krishan Kumar (London: SAGE, 2006), and Kevin M. Doak, "What Is a Nation and Who Belongs? National Narratives and the Ethnic Imagination in Twentieth," *American Historical Review* 102, no. 2 (1997).

²² Unless otherwise notated, the following quotations are from Kojima Hideo, "Metal Gear Solid," (Tokyo: Konami, 1998). I have taken name spellings from the official localized version, while passage translations are my own.

²³ “*Kakutōsaihokōsensha.*”

FOXHOUND the codes necessary for launching an actual attack, leaving Snake to use an override key to deactivate REX and prevent nuclear war. Both men then succumb to mysterious heart attacks.

Under his friend Colonel Roy Campbell's command and with the help of a support staff, Snake manages to sneak past enemy troops. He picks up two allies, and starts to defeat the heads of FOXHOUND. However, Snake learns that his superiors have deceived him about his mission: the government actually dispatched him as a carrier of the FOXDIE virus to infect the terrorists. As a bioweapon that targets specific DNA sequences, it is particularly potent against the FOXHOUND leadership and the genetically modified "genome soldiers" who fill out the ranks of the unit.²⁴ As these troops are slowly dying due to genetic disintegration, the terrorist leadership has demanded Big Boss's corpse as a means of stabilizing their men's DNA.

Putting betrayal aside, Snake overrides the Metal Gear launch program at the climax of the story—only to discover he has armed it instead. Liquid Snake, the commander of FOXHOUND, has been manipulating him all along. He plans to fire a nuclear warhead at China. Given upcoming anti-proliferation talks, he reasons that this will create international conflict. Liquid's goal in this is to start a new Cold War, and thus drive up the need for soldiers. After a pitched battle, Snake defeats REX and Liquid, whereupon the latter reveals that both he and Snake are clones of Big Boss, and bred to kill.

While Snake has effectively neutralized the threat, Secretary of Defense Jim Houseman forcibly takes command of the mission from Campbell. Houseman launches nuclear bombers to raze the island, thus erasing the wrongdoing on the part of the U.S. The president intervenes at the last second, and Snake escapes with one or the other of his allies on the understanding that he

²⁴ "*Genomu heishi.*"

is now officially “deceased.”

While *Metal Gear* tells an exceedingly complex tale through its kernels, it is similar to much that we have already seen. The principle of fictional displacement is evident in the timing of the game: produced in 1998, the story occurs in 2005. Though it is science fiction in one sense, it is firmly anchored within the real past—thereby rendering it a pseudo-historical work. In fact, the setting initially seems quite realistic: *Metal Gear* borrows frequently from the actual history of the Cold War, and brings in any number of U.S. governmental entities like DARPA. However, the story becomes increasingly more fantastic as the game continues. This is evident in futuristic technologies such as FOXDIE and Metal Gear REX, and in FOXHOUND’s superhuman abilities.

Between these kernels, satellites allow the player to sneak past genome soldiers, moving through the facility, and encountering FOXHOUND members. The game does have two possible endings, which are almost identical in content and differ only in which of Snake’s allies survives the ordeal. This point notwithstanding, *Metal Gear* is quite similar to *Onimusha*. However, the former deals far more directly with militarism as a central story theme than the latter. This draws us back to the specific diegetic framing. The four main groups of characters—FOXHOUND, monolithic military-industrial complex, Snake’s support staff, and Snake’s immediate allies—are particularly relevant for this analysis. Broadly speaking, the first two of these groups are villains; and the latter, protagonists. These affiliations reveal both the game’s intended and unintended readings.

Narrative: Progressive Reading

In considering its narrative, I argue that *Metal Gear* first and foremost espouses a progressive message. The game also politicizes this before the ending credits in a screen

detailing the actual state of nuclear proliferation in 1998:

In the 1980s, over 60,000 nuclear warheads existed in the world at any given time. Their total destructive power came to 1 million times that of the Hiroshima A-bomb. In January 1993, America and Russia signed START2 and agreed to reduce their deployed strategic nuclear warheads to 3,000-3,500 by December 31, 2000. However, as of 1998, 26,000 nuclear warheads still exist in the world.²⁵

The tone here is accusatory, implying the U.S. has failed to meet its treaty obligations.

The military-industrial complex within the game likewise serves as a critique of the U.S. Both DARPA, which deals in futuristic technologies, and ArmsTech run according to a warped logic: their greed for wealth and power have led them to create Metal Gear REX, a truly terrifying weapon that can fire nuclear warheads invisible both to radar and missile defense systems. REX questions American intentions and bespeaks a latent fear of an international “bully.”

Lurking behind this, however, is the specter of the IJA. This is most apparent in how the game establishes FOXHOUND as the antagonists. The unit is a self-acknowledged product of the Cold War. Their ultimate goal, as Liquid’s diatribe near the game’s end makes clear, is “rebuilding an age where warriors (*senshi*) like us will find use.”²⁶ In the peaceful 21st century, they seek to start a second Cold War to drive up the demand for militaries. In this warmongering spirit, FOXHOUND invokes a progressive version of the IJA: a military force inciting war for its own ends. That the terrorists choose the People’s Republic of China as a target underscores FOXHOUND’s ties with the IJA as an aggressor against mainland Asia—and thereby renders their violence ritualistic in progressive eyes.

²⁵ “1980 nendai, sekai niwa tsūji roku man patsu iijō no kakuheiki ga sonzai shita. Sono hakairyoku wa Hiroshimagatagenbaku no 100 manpatsu bun ni sōtō suru./1993 nen 1 gatsu ni START2 ga musubare Amerika-Roshia wa seireki 2000 nen 12 gatsu 31 nichī made ni senryaku kakudantō no haibisū o sorezore 3000~3500 hatsu ni sakugen suru koto ni dōi shita./Shikashi 1998 nen genzai, sekai ni wa nao ni man roku sen hatsu no kakuheiki ga sonzai shite iru.”

²⁶ “Ore tachi no yō na senshi ga ikasareru toki o futatabi kizukiageru koto.”

The framing of Jim Houseman also speaks volumes in this regard. As Secretary of Defense, Houseman acts without the president's consent, most notably by ordering the island destroyed. Here, the game overtly references the IJA hijacking Japan from the rightful civilian leadership. In this light, FOXHOUND's insurrection is premediated by the February 26 Incident in 1936, where a cadre of young IJA officers defied their superiors and occupied the Ministry of War to restore the emperor. While this group arose from an internal division in the army, it was nevertheless a particularly virulent outcome of the military system. Whether or not *Metal Gear's* creators chose this incident as a point of intertextual reference—and I do not believe they did so consciously—this incident necessarily premediates the depiction of FOXHOUND. Indeed, it is difficult to overlook the similarities: the terrorist group in the game, too, may be seen as symptomatic of a greater systemic ill. As he once belonged to FOXHOUND, Snake may share in their militancy. Liquid accuses him of having an appetite for killing (*satsuriku*)—for why else would Snake have continued his mission in spite of numerous betrayals?

Yet, Snake confronts FOXHOUND and the military-industrial complex, counterposing the player controlling him with the U.S. and the IJA. Insofar as it is a reaction to aggressive terrorism, Snake's mission itself is for the greater good of all humanity. In this sense, player violence is defensive and diegetically justified against the virulent threat of perpetual warfare. Snake's personal development also draws him away from the military in general. This journey is expressed in character dialogue through the word "purpose" (*mokuteki*). The term appears frequently and with increasingly more profound overtones. At the game's beginning, it speaks to concrete goals: what the terrorists want, and so on. As time goes on, however, it comes to connote life purpose. In both endings, Snake and his surviving ally reaffirm the need to find a new *raison d'être*. The protagonist even goes so far as to say, "let's find a new path, for both of

us.”²⁷ Where this will lead is left unclear, but the game obviously implies that a meaningful life can be lived only outside of soldiery. Here, *Metal Gear* takes an overtly pacifist stance: nothing good comes of war. This point is underscored by the fact that Snake cannot save both of his allies. Insofar as the game paints him in a protective role—and his charges are of differing sexes—his masculinity holds to the same principles of defensiveness we have seen elsewhere. In spite of this, his proximity to matters military ultimately means that his aegis is imperfect. The game problematizes Snake’s role as a protector, suggesting that tragedy awaits those who take to soldiery, whatever their reasons.²⁸

The game further perpetuates this message in its discussion of genetics as creating soldiers over multiple generations. Snake, as a clone of Big Boss, has literally been bred to fight. Meryl became a soldier to comprehend her father. Naomi, one member of the heterosocial and multi-national support staff, chose a career in science to find a connection with parents she never knew. All three characters eventually distance themselves from this thinking. Only Liquid argues for genetic determinism: “No one can disobey their genes. That is fate.”²⁹ Naomi’s voiceover at the end of the game puts a stop to this: “We cannot be bound by fate, nor ruled by our genetics. We must choose our own way to live.”³⁰

I would argue that the attention paid to genetic determinism amounts to acknowledging the past. This acts as a nod to the last great war: we must understand our (grand)fathers’ battles, quite literally in Meryl’s case. However, Meryl ultimately rejects soldiery as a fool’s game. Remembering the past, then, is a worthy goal, but only provided that it leads to a break with

²⁷ “*Ore tachi no, atarashii michi o mitsukeyō.*”

²⁸ In this regard, *Metal Gear*’s plot may parallel *The Human Condition* by Kobayashi Masaki.

²⁹ “*Dare mo idenshi ni sakarau koto wa dekinai, sore wa unmei da.*”

³⁰ “*Unmei ni shibarete wa ikenai. Idenshi ni shihai sarete wa ikenai. Ikikata o erabu no wa watashi tachi na no yo.*”

militarism. Liquid, obsessed with his genes, cannot let go of this belligerent past—and is punished for it. In finding purpose outside of militarism, the game promotes a progressive view of history that encourages remembering the war to be a better pacifist now. On all three major points, then, the narrative conforms to a progressive sensibility: 1) war is portrayed as ethically wrong; 2) Snake confronts an aggressive IJA; 3) Snake resists a belligerent U.S that is unabashedly developing the tools of war and war capability. In the end, then, the game promotes a moral pacifism and criticizes any who do not hold to it.

From this reading of the narrative, we can construct the implied player as Japanese, and 15 years or older.³¹ For reasons both listed above and to follow, he is also likely male. Politically, he may lean slightly towards the progressives, or belongs to Seaton’s “don’t know, don’t care” group. Due to the game’s violent material and treatment of military matters, the implied player is most likely not progressive.³² This suggests that *Metal Gear* attempts to persuade the player of the progressive’s legitimacy.

Centrist reading

Even while targeting a progressive player at the most overt level of narrative, however, *Metal Gear* also panders to the center. The reasons for this are essentially in line with Seaton’s profitability threshold: given that the central group makes up the majority of the political spectrum, media products that conform to their historical narrative have the greatest earning potential.³³ As *Metal Gear* curbs its progressive message to increase its profitability through a certain ambiguity, it invites a reading that ironically contradicts the message it purports, a

³¹ As noted above, the game was given a “C” rating (15+) by the Computer Entertainment Rating System (CERO).

³² Seaton, *Japan's Contested War Memories*, p. 21.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

reading that hangs on the language associated with the soldier and conceals actual Japanese militarism within history.

The text constructs military identities in one of three terms that conform to contemporary usage in Japan: “soldiers” (*gunjin*), “warriors” (*senshi*), or “troops” (*heishi*). While *heishi* signifies the genome soldiers, the other two terms take on racialized overtones. Related to Anglo-Americans Campbell and Meryl, *gunjin* comes to connote unthinking tools of government, and excises individuality from the soldier. For instance, Snake chides Campbell when learning that the colonel joined the mission because Meryl, his niece, had been taken hostage: “Got a personal motive, huh? Not very soldierly of you.”³⁴ As mentioned, Meryl’s choice to become *gunjin* stems from a desire to know the past. Both characters are punished for these personal transgressions of their role as *gunjin*: Campbell proves himself disloyal, while Meryl sustains a near fatal wound. She recants, “I was soft, to be attracted to soldiery... On the battlefield, there is nothing. Nothing is born of war. For my sake, Snake, survive!”³⁵ While this functions as a general renunciation of militarism, it also redeems Meryl from her specific identity as *gunjin*.

Senshi, conversely, indicates subaltern groups. Snake never makes explicit his own ethnic background, yet Raven, a member of FOXHOUND, calls him *senshi*, as does Naomi who claims Japanese-American heritage. Raven also indicates that Snake has “Asian blood,” and suggests a shared ancestry in Mongolia in a way that heavily implies Snake is partially Japanese.³⁶ In lieu of more authoritative sources, this exchange heightens the implied player’s sense of association

³⁴ “*Kojinteki na kidō ka... Gunjin rashikunai na.*”

³⁵ “*Watashi ga amakatta. Gunjin nanka ni akogarete... Senjyō niwa nanimo nai. Sensō dewa nanimo umarenai. Watashi no kawari ni ikinuite, Sunēku!*”

³⁶ “*Omae, tōyōjin no chi ga nagarete iru na... Naruhodo, omae mo oretachi to onaji monguru kei ka. Arasuka-indian wa nihonjin ni chikai, sosen ga onaji da tomo iwarete iru.*”

with the protagonist, and, ironically, FOXHOUND.³⁷ No named member of this terrorist unit is exclusively Euro-American, save Liquid, who is a clone. Of the five who appear in the game, Revolver Ocelot is Russian, Psycho Mantis seemingly was an inhabitant of a former USSR colony, Vulcan Raven is an Inuit shaman, and Sniper Wolf is Kurdish.³⁸ *Senshi* are tied together through victimhood, all having suffered at American or Soviet hands. Ocelot—the exception to this rule—is revealed after the final credits to be a double-agent apparently working for the American President.³⁹ The Russian notwithstanding, FOXHOUND thus becomes the ethnic “other” who band together to resist the world of *gunjin*; that is, Anglo-American hegemony. Through Snake, Japan succumbs to victimhood at the whim of greater powers, a move that reinforces the foundational narrative. The game’s story represses memories of Japanese militarism to claim victimhood at American hands.

As a term, *senshi* also forgets the actual history of the IJA as an oppressor while simultaneously glorifying Japan’s pre-modern martial values. This reading is enabled by the retroactive influence the word *senshi* exercises on the subalterns, making them pre-modern warriors acting in a post-modern world. FOXHOUND members are unique individuals within an outdated honor-bound system of combat. By inferring Japanese association with this group, Japan’s modern history falls away. Snake becomes a samurai-like figure in the new millennium: tragically loyal to a government that no longer has need of human warriors. This point is made clear in the character of Gray Fox, a former (and presumed deceased) member of FOXHOUND

³⁷ In *Metal Gear Solid 4* (2008), Snake’s surrogate mother reveals that his egg donor was Japanese (“*kenkō na nihonjin jyosei*”).

³⁸ “Metal Gear Solid Game Archives,” Konami Digital Entertainment, <http://www.konami.jp/gs/game/mgs/>.

³⁹ In later games, this point becomes far muddier. In fact, Ocelot worked for a secret agency without any particular national allegiances.

excruciatingly transformed into a cyborg ninja—complete with samurai sword—by some shadowy branch of the American government. As becomes apparent through Gray Fox’s infrequent appearances throughout the game, this process has robbed him of his sanity and personality. Now, he lives merely to fight and defeat Snake in one-on-one combat. Although he ultimately dies to save Snake, Gray Fox represents *senshi* in the extreme: using a premodern weapon and warrior-like values with postmodern technology, he abridges modernity and the figure of the *gunjin*.⁴⁰ As is implicit here, the possibility of Japanese *gunjin* vanishes into the idea of *senshi*. This releases some of the pressure behind the game’s entrenched critique of soldiery, comfortably relegating Japanese militarism to the pre-modern era instead. Here, then, the game overlooks the IJA. It places Japanese militarism as something of the distant past, and does not force the player to consider any culpability as a potential descendant of the *gunjin*.

The portrayal of the death of FOXHOUND’s agents—save Ocelot—further paints *senshi* as beings out of time.⁴¹ Wolf, for instance, spent a horrific childhood as a Kurd in a war zone, turning towards violence as a means of escape. The game uses heart-wrenching music to induce an affective response in the player in the case of Mantis’s death as well. This casts FOXHOUND as victims, while bemoaning the anachronistic value set of *senshi*. In this sense, the game raises the specter of the IJA, yet fails to specifically indict the Japanese *gunjin*. Similarly, the game also criticizes *gunjin* when related to Anglo-Americans, but never specifically identifies the *heishi* as

⁴⁰ In the re-release of the game on a different console, *Metal Gear Solid: The Twin Snakes* (2004), Snake himself takes up this sword in order to defeat REX.

⁴¹ Ocelot is the sole survivor of FOXHOUND, but given his complex allegiances, his inclusion within the subaltern category is debatable. On the one hand, he may simply be an American agent; on the other, he may be “Eastern” as an ex-Soviet agent.

American.⁴² *Metal Gear* toes the line by calling the interactive enemies “terrorists,” rather than specifying their nationality. Thus, while the narrative remains pacifist in its critique of soldiery, it avoids anything too uncomfortable for the implied centrist player: the Japanese *gunjin* who might raise distressing questions, or the deaths of American soldiers that might derail the foundational narrative. *Metal Gear* undercuts its overt message through an adherence to the selective forgetfulness, victimhood narrative, and pro-U.S. stance of the progressive-leaning group.

Nationalist reading

Nevertheless, any thinking players would be aware that they could kill Americans. This draws us to the final reading of the narrative. By means of glorifying a racialized notion of *senshi* death on the battlefield and positioning the U.S. as a hegemonic threat, *Metal Gear* unconsciously taps into nationalist myths and ironically praises the IJA. I assume this inclusion to be unintentional; however, I lack the empirical evidence to demonstrate this claim. I also acknowledge there is a chance that this ambiguity is intentional and meant to secure the game’s profit across the entire political spectrum. Nevertheless, I believe the textual evidence listed above, as well as the fact that nationalistic media tend to alienate other parts of the audience, suffices as proof of unintentionality for our purposes here.

As previously discussed, the nationalists (and conservatives) wish to return honor to the fallen as “[t]he whole war cannot be acknowledged as ‘aggressive:’ that would delegitimize the nobility of the war generation and render their deaths meaningless.”⁴³ Their agenda is to see the

⁴² This omission is one found in media products associated with the foundational narrative. *Gojira*, for instance, features numerous allusions to the U.S., but not one overt reference. For more, see Igarashi Yoshikuni, *Bodies of Memory: Narratives of War in Postwar Japanese Culture, 1945-1970* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 114-118.

⁴³ Seaton, *Japan's Contested War Memories*, p. 22.

war dead exonerated. Snake echoes this struggle in describing defeated soldiers as “dogs,” even using the phrase dog’s death (*inujini*) when talking to Meryl.⁴⁴ Put more concisely, the protagonist makes it clear that *gunjin*’s deaths are senseless without victory. However, he is far more sympathetic to *senshi*, who may gain honor by dying on the battlefield. As Wolf is dying, for example, Snake calls the wolves, which she is so fond of, righteous and noble, and ends by saying she deserves her moniker.⁴⁵ This highly charged language allows *senshi* who die in battle to be remembered as valiant, regardless of the cause. Given the racialized element of *senshi*, this positioning raises the spirit of the IJA in a more sympathetic light.

The fact that FOXHOUND’s deaths all occur while resisting U.S. hegemony foregrounds this sentiment. The theme of defiance plays well for the nationalists, for whom “[p]ride is based in denying culpability, lauding soldiers’ heroism and affirming positive aspects of Japanese militarism, in particular...the liberation of Asian nations from Western colonialism.”⁴⁶ With America poised to overrun the subaltern FOXHOUND, this seems dangerously close to the rhetoric of the Greater East Asia war; that is, that holy battle must be waged in order to resist the Imperial powers. The terrorists’ cause may prove to be a losing one, but the glorification of their deaths links repressed memories of dead soldiers to the goal of resisting the West.

In sum, the game commiserates with FOXHOUND as Cold War subalterns to remember and glorify the Japanese *senshi*. To these warriors, the game ascribes personal goals that are understandable, even relatable. This parallels the aforementioned shift 1990s cinema that “tries

⁴⁴ “*Kore wa kunren dewa nai, seishi o kaketa tatakai da. Hiirō mo hiroin mo inai, makereba tada no inujini da.*”

⁴⁵ “*Ōkami wa kōketsu na ikimono da, inu to wa chigau. Yūpikkugo dewa ōkami no koto o keburuneku to ii, kōki na ikimono toshite agamete iru. Ore tachi no yō na yōhei wa ‘sensō no inu’ to yobarete iru. Tashika ni ore tachi wa shōmohin. Shikashi, omae wa chigau, ōkami da, inu dewa nai.*”

⁴⁶ Seaton, *Japan's Contested War Memories*, p. 22

to turn the whole war into one fought to protect loved ones, not to sacrifice for the fatherland or the Emperor.”⁴⁷ Casting FOXHOUND members as sympathetic characters valorizes their sacrifice against the U.S., and by proxy that of the Japanese soldier during the war. The unit becomes a floating signifier, a critique and an exoneration of the IJA. The game allows for a reading so antithetical to its intended message precisely because the narrative straddles progressive and centrist positions. The former embeds a deep distrust of the U.S., while the latter represses memories of IJA atrocities with a nostalgic view of the (pre-modern) past. From this emerges a perspective that unintentionally justifies the Pacific War as one of liberation. In terms of Japan’s relationship with the U.S., the ethicality of the war, and the memories of the wartime IJA, then, the game ultimately falls within the parameters of nationalist logic.

Gameplay: Progressive Reading

At the narrative level, the presence of the nationalist rhetoric is relatively weak. However, nationalist elements are embedded deeply within the procedural logic of the game—deeply, indeed, in how *Metal Gear* demands to be played.

This is once again an ironic and unwilled addition. *Metal Gear*, based in Kojima’s design philosophy that “fighting alone does not a game make,” fundamentally belongs to the stealth genre of games (“Tactical Espionage Action,” as the game’s cover itself puts it).⁴⁸ As an agent alone in hostile territory, the player must infiltrate the facility by crawling, hiding, and waiting as necessary. The game penalizes players who disobey this logic: *Metal Gear* becomes significantly harder for those who go in all guns blazing. Snake can be easily killed if discovered by the enemy. Depending on where the protagonist dies, the player may also have to replay a given

⁴⁷ Hashimoto, *The Long Defeat*, p. 74.

⁴⁸ "Metal Gear Solid Game Archives," Konami Digital Entertainment, <http://www.konami.jp/gs/game/mgs/>.

section—traverse the same terrain, skirt the same enemies, and so on. Both of these points can be sources of great annoyance, and encourage silent and careful play.

Nevertheless, violence is not disallowed by the game rules. In one sense, this is thematically justified in the narrative via the aforementioned defensive themes. Moreover, the connection between FOXHOUND and the IJA allows for “punishing” them as warmongering criminals. This works in tune with a moral absolutist rationale: the *senshi* and *heishi* have acted violently, and therefore deserve retribution for their deeds no matter what their reasons may be. However, the game resists allowing the player-subjectivity to make this judgment. It is precisely because FOXHOUND acts as a surrogate for the IJA that the player ought to be merciful and find the moral high ground. The message within this gameplay denounces punishment in the form of murder, even against a radical military unit. As “[p]rogressives regard themselves as humanitarian leaders of moral conscience,” *Metal Gear*’s adherence to non-violent gameplay gives the player the experience of moral pacifism.⁴⁹ The game proceduralizes its progressive message within the satellites: violence need not be the answer to violent situations. In this regard, the non-violent aspects of gameplay may be seen as ritualistic, re-inscribing the progressive political position.

This logic operates in cutscenes as well. While these will depict Snake harming others, the fact that the kernels are non-interactive effectively disengages the player-subjectivity from the violence. These videos denaturalize the player’s bond with Snake by eliciting a sense of moral abhorrence for this *senshi* within the body-subject. This, too, heightens the sense of moral absolutism. Moreover, in most cases FOXHOUND members succumb to fatal wounds. Snake is shown as killing someone himself only once, and this at Wolf’s request. The game is fairly coy

⁴⁹ Seaton, *Japan's Contested War Memories*, p. 22.

in this instance, since the screen fades to white and the player can only hear a gunshot. Even in the cutscenes, then, the game avoids dirtying the player-subjectivity's hands through suspending interactivity.

Metal Gear even uses one cutscene to censure the violence of the player-subjectivity. Though scenes are normally filmed from a third-person perspective, the game switches to a first-person view when Liquid condemns Snake as a killer. The accusation is thus directed squarely at the player, who has killed enemy characters by this point in the game. In spite of allowing for such play—even demanding such play—*Metal Gear* lodges a barbed critique of violence in this moment. The game thus reinforces its proceduralized pacifistic message within this kernel: any killing, no matter the reason, is wrong.

Nationalist reading

This heavy-handed cutscene notwithstanding, the satellites succumb to the same fragmentation as the kernels, as *Metal Gear* also condones fatal violence under certain conditions. Cutscenes of killing may beg player disapproval, but the same cannot be said for the violence in one-on-one fights against FOXHOUND members. When combating Vulcan Raven, Snake is locked in a space with the marauding villain. Escape is impossible, and hiding is a temporary option at best. Violence is justified here for two reasons, both of which shift towards moral utilitarianism. First, these fights are for survival, as the player-subjectivity must literally kill or be killed, having no other means to progress in the game. Second, in terms of diegetic framing, defeating FOXHOUND will prevent nuclear war. In both cases, the ends outweigh the evil of killing for the player-subjectivity. Subsequently, the body-subject must grapple with these actions under the given circumstances: should self-defense merit the use of lethal force? What about stopping a terrorist force? By couching the player-subjectivity's actions in such terms,

Metal Gear allows the body-subject to reconsider a pacifist sensibility.

The same holds true for several pre-scripted game sequences. One of these occurs early on, when the player-subjectivity must shoot a number of enemies to continue the game. Designed as a tutorial for a newly acquired gun, the event's abruptness comes as a shock. In response, the game consciously targets the male body-subject, as the sequence comes shortly after meeting Meryl. Three foes burst into the rooms with guns blazing, and she will scream loudly if shot. This seeks to stimulate a protective response in the male body-subject. The game coercively uses gender roles to overcome the aversion to killing on the part of the player. It further lessens the blow by having the *heishi*'s bodies vanish after they hit the ground, leaving behind no evidence of the player-subjectivity's deeds.

Metal Gear ultimately justifies killing through a chivalric frame, asking the body-subject to consider killing in defense of the weak. Though the links here with *Onimusha* are palpable, in fact the two games are quite different: whereas the Sengoku-era game relegates overtly gendered protective violence to the diegetic framing, *Metal Gear* actually proceduralizes it. Similarly, *Onimusha* condemns violence in its conclusion, closing the symbolic potential of defense. *Metal Gear*'s narrative, on the other hand, leaves the symbolic potential open, calling for a movement forward—that is, *beyond* militarism. The dénouement will rob Snake of one ally, it leaves the other unharmed, and thereby partially endorses his defensive masculinity. In total, these elements unintentionally give the body-subject access to a space for reassessing moral pacifism as a male player in addition to further questions related to the entrenched nationalist rhetoric.

We can see that *Metal Gear* proceduralizes utilitarian violence in ways that directly undercut the progressive message of the stealth gameplay. As an imposed moral regime, it portrays non-violence as a luxury: soldiers must kill in self-defense, and in the defense of others.

In this light, pacifism and moral absolutism seem overly idealized. This pairs well with the romanticized *senshi* within the narrative. FOXHOUND, though villains, are sympathetically portrayed in resisting Western hegemony. By proxy, this also raises the possibility of an IJA to which the player may relate. Combined with the utilitarian experiences of the player-subjectivity, the game makes an argument for the nationalist view of history across its kernels and satellites: it distrusts the U.S., reifies the IJA's sacrifice and reaffirms the ethicality of the war.

Naturally, the body-subject may well reject the nationalist rhetoric. Yet, this message connects with weak points in the centrist and progressive positions. As for the matter of moral pacifism, “[m]any Japanese began to find this stance unrealistic and irrational” after the end of the Cold War.⁵⁰ The game plays into this concern by justifying violence in defense of self and “others.” Furthermore, as the game forces the player-subjectivity to kill, it also problematizes the way that the central position scapegoats the IJA: not all soldiers’ actions can be written off without considering the circumstances. In toto, *Metal Gear* suggests that the war was just, and that the IJA may not be a monolithic villain. The acts of the player-subjectivity serve as proof of the necessity to reconsider nationalist arguments. Subsequently, the body-subject must engage with these claims by means of extant historico-political discourses. It is here, then, that the potentially transformative power of *Metal Gear* lives, and also here that the game becomes a historico-political technology that may push the player from the center towards nationalism.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that *Metal Gear Solid* ties together disparate historical myths as a technology of memory. As a node interlinking numerous historic discourses, games allow the player-subjectivity to test out the legitimacy of others’ claims. Beneath this, again, lies

⁵⁰ Hironori Sasada, "Youth and Nationalism in Japan," *SAIS Review* 26, no. 2 (2006), p. 117.

the symbolic composition of its violence that itself questions moral pacifism. Though the game attempts to undo this symbolic potential in part through proceduralizing a progressive message, both narrative and gameplay elements undercut this rhetoric. This does not represent the intended meaning of the text, but rather reflects a series of designs that unwittingly create a hole within the progressive view for nationalist sentiment to fill. Finally, I have suggested that gameplay and narrative aspects of the game cast doubt on the trustworthiness of the U.S., the place of the IJA, and the ethicality of the war itself. This, in turn, may engender player sympathy for the nationalists' historico-political myth.

This is the latent power of the ambiguity at the interstices of war memory, politics, and ludic violence: powerful transformative potential. *Metal Gear* is remarkable in part because it deals very directly with themes of militarism in ways that *Onimusha* and *Sengoku BASARA* do not. However, *Metal Gear* ends up falling prey to the ambiguity of masculinity and of violence, resulting in a product that links two different ends of the political spectrum. As we have seen, it is precisely its status as a cultural artifact that allows it to take on this function as a cultural technology—suggesting one unexpected path away from retrospective wondering.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have argued that videogames are cultural artifacts and technologies in that they are shaped by, as well as shape, certain ideologies. I have focused particularly on war memory, gender constructions, and political identities. I have shown how memories of the Imperial Japanese Army render historical simulations of World War II—one of the most common genres in the American market—unlikely in Japan’s case, if not impossible. Instead, the Japanese game industry has evolved the tactic of fictional displacement, which allows for certain types of violence. Even then, however, games must deal with the theme of militarism; that is, the intertextual referencing of elements of the IJA that sit badly with the foundational narrative. Games in the pseudo-historical genre have come to rely upon caricatures of the IJA as antagonists in order to align the Japanese player with civilian narratives of war. In this sense, the violence that antagonists use against the player avatar is ritualistic, underscoring the demonization of militaristic aggression that is homosocial and references subjugation. The players themselves are allowed to use defensive violence—a form that pseudo-historical games justify through composing masculinities that use violence in retaliation or to protect others.

However, there are two layers of ambiguity to this construction. First, tropes of protection and familialism were not unknown during the pre-war and wartime periods, tarnishing the novelty of protective masculinity in games. Second, defensive violence becomes symbolic within the Japanese context insofar as it raises questions about moral pacifism as a practice. I have shown how two games set during the *sengoku* period have each responded differently to these ambiguities. *Onimusha* quietly chastises the player’s actions, even in defensive form, seeking to close any doors the symbolic nature of the violence may have opened at the narrative level. *Sengoku BASARA*, conversely, uses its excess and parody to isolate its violent play.

Nevertheless, it questions the link between defensive violence and men, ultimately making certain strides towards de-gendering violence for parodic purpose.

I finally explored the transformative potential of *Metal Gear Solid*, a game that deals directly with American militarism and ties together disparate Japanese historical myths. At its surface, it espouses a progressive message using the actions of FOXHOUND to ritualistically demonize a caricature of the IJA. However, its gameplay and narrative both ultimately undercut this rhetoric: through curbing its superficial message to meet the expectations of the centrist player, the game unwittingly opens a hole at the narrative level that allows for a degree of sympathy with FOXHOUND in racialized terms. Moreover, the game's dependence upon certain types of violence—both in terms of gendered protection and self-defense—allows the symbolic potential to not only raise questions concerning moral pacifism, but also to openly suggest that it may be overly idealistic in its absolute morality. The game reflects the fragmented landscape of war memory; however, in its specific usage of historico-political myths, the game presents an unintended nationalist message with the power to affect the player's political subjectivity.

In naming games cultural artifacts, my hope is to demonstrate that their effects are greater than that of texts intended for play. Fictional displacement adds an obfuscating layer to these proceedings in many ways, but each of the pseudo-historical games I have examined is in dialogue both with the logic associated with the myths of war memory, and with greater societal changes of the late 1990s. In terms of masculinity, *Onimusha* and *BASARA* each contain threads of thought that, while perhaps not novel in content, are newer in presentation. The (re)combination of defensiveness with masculinity and violence sits well with cries for “normalizing” the nation—that is, restoring Japan's capability for offensive military action. Such calls continue to emerge since the collapse of the economic bubble in 1991. As I have

mentioned, this selfsame timespan also marked an era of “loss” for salarymen in terms of work stability, family, and societal approval.¹ It is only against this societal backdrop of change that the defensive violence within pseudo-historical videogames takes on its symbolic overtones. Even though the narratives of *Onimusha* and *BASARA* display ambivalence towards violence, their very structure raises questions concerning pacifist nationhood, and whether it is truly the best path forward for defense of loved ones. They also ask whether non-violent salarymen can provide for their families, challenging hegemonic conceptions of Japanese masculinity altogether. In other words, these games reimagine violence in a defensive manner that has implications for the public debates over the scope of Japan’s Self-Defense Force. It is not difficult, after all, to read the masculinity within these games allegorically: if not for Samanosuke, what would have happened to Yuki and Yumemaru? *Onimusha*’s plot answers this question with a moral imperative not so very different from *Metal Gear*’s moral utilitarianism. Whatever negative attitudes these games take towards defensive violence, they nevertheless pose piercing questions concerning key social issues—and, through *ludic phronesis*, we cannot simply discount their transformative potential.

I should hasten to say that I am not suggesting that any single game has the power to dislodge people from their political positions. Given *Onimusha* and *BASARA*’s denial of their respective lacuna, their effects are likely curtailed as well. Moreover, *Metal Gear* is an exceptional work, being one of the few of its generation to deal so directly with issues of militarism. In so doing, it captures the fragmented political and mnemonic landscape quite well. That being said, the common thread between all three games remains the ambiguity surrounding the role of violence. Ludic violence in any Japanese pseudo-historical game may well be

¹ Roberson and Suzuki, “Introduction,” pp. 9-10.

symbolic, but *Metal Gear* alone leaves the path open for reinterpretation in its dénouement. What the three together suggest is that the entanglement of memory, gender, and politics means that the pseudo-historical genre—and perhaps videogames as a medium in general—do have the capacity to become cultural technologies in aggregate. The question that this research raises is one of reception: how have videogames affected their Japanese players?

This thesis ultimately has been a pilot study, and I have not conducted the in-depth ethnography of the player community to speak to the other half of my overall argument. In closing, then, I hope to suggest future directions that this research might take. The first, and most obvious, is a detailed analysis of videogame reception in two particular areas. First, how do male players' self-image change through exposure to these works? Any number of scholars have written on *otaku* as a form of counter-hegemonic manhood. Ian Condry has noted that “many interpretations of otaku masculinity share a common assumption with salaryman masculinity, namely, that value (a man's worth) tends to be grounded in productivity.”² However, he takes this issue with this axiom, arguing that *otaku* constitutes a new form of manhood that creates value recursively through consumption. In off- and online forums, this can result in “the urge to translate immaterial, internalized consumption into something outwardly productive.”³ While there is some doubt in my mind that the gamer and *otaku* subcultures are entirely isomorphic, Condry's broader point about people's relationship with media is an intriguing one. How does the body-subject transform the player-subjectivity's experiences into (im)material forms of productive labor? Moreover, how do female players view this selfsame pairing of manhood and protective violence? Akiko Sugawa-Shimada has already noted that *Sengoku BASARA* is a

² Condry, “Love Revolution,” p. 265.

³ *Ibid.*, 280.

seminal text in the *rekijyo* phenomenon, where young women have developed an interest in actual history via pseudo-historical media.⁴ More research in this vein is necessary to understand how the consumption of gender constructions may transfer into other productive realms.

Second, we ought to question how consumption of pseudo-historical games affects political subjectivity. My study suggests that one outlet of production, in Condry's sense, may well be political conservatism. Any number of scholars have considered nationalist manga and anime in the contemporary shift of youth towards nationalism.⁵ Adding videogames to these media will, I believe, provide a clearer picture of the cultural forces influencing political subjectivities. This thesis thus indicates that videogames deserve scrutiny in constructivist accounts of Japanese politics. In this, examining not only the text, but also the audience, will be critical. Naturally, no media exerts a hegemonic influence upon the viewer, who themselves are free to agree, disagree, or simply ignore messages. However, I believe that reactions are structured by both the text and the cultural background. Political commentary may well function as one outlet for *otaku* and player masculinity. In any case, an ethnographic examination of male players would doubtlessly prove illuminating from both political and anthropological standpoints.

A related line of inquiry has to do with the changes in games through time. Needless to say, a synchronic examination of the period I have examined would aid in expanding upon and refining my basic framework. However, I think a diachronic view of the pseudo-historical genre would prove more valuable. I have detected fictional displacement at work in games made

⁴ Akiko Sugawa-Shimada, "Rekijo, Pilgrimage and 'Pop-Spiritualism': Pop-Culture-Induced Heritage Tourism of/for Young Women" (paper presented at the Japan Forum, 2015).

⁵ For example, see Rumi Sakamoto, "Will You Go to War? Or Will You Stop Being Japanese? Nationalism and History in Kobayashi Yoshinori's *Sensoron*," *Japan Focus* 23 (2008).

between 1998 and 2005, but I cannot say whether this strategy is unique to this period. Discovering how and when fictional displacement became widespread would elucidate broader changes in war memory, gender, and politics. In a similar vein, I believe that historicizing the genre would allow for a more nuanced understanding of its capacity as a technology. As it happens, “[s]urveys have shown that support for pacifist policies has declined from 15.5 percent in 1972 to 5.6 percent in 2006.”⁶ Have games from this period preempted the emergence of certain types of discourse surrounding, say, the SDF? Or have they evolved contemporaneously, in which case games would function to reinforce, rather than to generate, certain ideas? Moreover, how have Japanese media in general worked diachronically to reimagine violence, and to what degree have these ideas moved transmedially? In this regard, my research raises the need for a cultural history of games, both as they have evolved as a medium and how they have borrowed from, and broken with, other forms of Japanese media.

Finally, I return to issues of hybridity. While a cultural history of games doubtless would take into account the Euro-American influences on the Japanese industry, these games have global appeal. As such, the intra-regional flows of ludic media offer an excellent opportunity to practice “Asia as method.”⁷ If, as I have argued, concerns of war memory have shaped the direction of play, how do we explain the regional popularity of the games? Does this truncation of the colonial past allow for unimpeded passage across national boundaries? My preliminary research hints that single-player Japanese games in general have not enjoyed great success in South Korea. Japanese producers of both hardware and software have not made concerted pushes

⁶ Sasada, "Youth and Nationalism in Japan," p. 117.

⁷ For examples, see Koichi Iwabuchi, "Korean Wave and Inter-Asian Referencing," in *The Korean Wave: Korean Media Go Global*, ed. Youna Kim (New York: Routledge, 2013). and Biao Xiang, Brenda Yeoh, and Mika Toyota, eds., *Return: Nationalizing Transnational Mobility in Asia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

into the neighboring market, not even after the end of South Korea's governmental ban on Japanese cultural products in 2000. Nonetheless, Korean player communities have grown around Japanese ludic media, sometimes illicitly. How these groups perceive such products, too, may reveal interesting developments in terms of politico-historical discourses of war and colonialism in both nations. This line of inquiry, then, offers a potentially rich vein of information for cultural scholars of East Asia.

I opened this thesis by speaking to a sense of retrospective wondering prevalent in Japan since the 1990s. The videogame industry developed partially against this background, and this doubtless leaves a legacy even today. However, the largest question that only time can answer is how these games will figure into the shape of post-post war Japan. Ludic media are actively engaged in societal processes: culture not only affects games, but games also affect culture within a particular historical moment. Hopefully, my research proves a bridge between Game Studies and Japanese Studies: for the former to consider the value of ideo-cultural context within reading strategies, and the latter to engage in a systematic study of ludic media as they contribute to the imagining of the past, the present, and the future.

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