

demand that, while labor is punishingly hard and absurdly pointless, it nevertheless has its measure. Sisyphus, the Analog Prince, labors to roll up everything in this world-made-over under the mark of the digital and offer it up for appraisal. What the digital has always wanted—to be the form of all forms—has come to pass. Our punishment for attempting to steal those forms for our own purposes is to labor endlessly to repeat them. *Katamari Damacy* extends the atopia of the digital to the heavens themselves.

WHEN the Prince manages to complete a level, *Katamari Damacy* rewards the gamer with a cut scene, a short animation about the Hoshino family. They are cute but rather chunky, as if the digital had already snapped them to its grid. The Hoshinos watch their astronaut father Tomio as he begins his voyage to the Moon. Tomio's mission is canceled because there is no Moon to which to travel. The last mission of the game, "Make the Moon," requires rolling up most of the objects on Earth, including the Hoshino family and their father's rocket. Once the Prince has restored the Moon to the King's satisfaction, a final cut scene shows the Hoshino family—mother and father, boy and girl—on the new Moon. Having completed the reconstruction of the cosmos as one of digital distinctions rather than analog differences, a digital people find themselves already there, already inhabiting the Moon to which Tomio was to travel. There is no need to travel—that great pastime of topographic times. Now there's no place to go that is not subject to the same code. The reign of King Digital, the King of All Cosmos, is complete.<sup>3</sup>

## ATOPIA

(on *Vice City*)

IT'S LIKE PARADISE HERE. Everything seems pastel-hued as you drive by, with the radio on. The car is stolen, but so long as the police didn't see you it won't matter. You don't really have to be anywhere or do anything. The hotels and condos are comfortable and discreet. If you need money, mug someone. The body makes a satisfyingly squishy sound when you kick it. There are adventures. You get to meet some interesting people. It is a city of gangsters, hustlers, and honeys. It's all tourism, drugs, guns, cars, and personal services. Nobody makes anything, except maybe "ice cream," porn, and counterfeit money. Everybody buys, sells, or steals. *Vice City* is a nice place. It is not quite utopia. And nor is it some dark dystopia. There's no storyline here, where paradise turns nasty, in which the telling early detail turns out to be a clue to the nightmare beneath the

surface, the severed ear of *Blue Velvet*. Without the possibility of dystopia, there's no utopia either. Terry Eagleton: "All utopian writing is also dystopian, since, like Kant's sublime, it cannot help reminding us of our mental limits in the act of striving to go beyond them." In *Vice City* there is no "beyond." As one would expect in a high-end land of vice, its offer is *all-inclusive*.<sup>3</sup>

IN GAMESPACE, the very possibility of utopia is foreclosed. It is no longer possible to describe a shining city upon the hill, as if it were a special topic untouched by the everyday workaday world. No space is sacred; no space is separate. Not even the space of the page. The gamelike extends its lines everywhere and nowhere. And yet, a pure digital game like *Vice City* might still perform some curious, critical function. Why do so many choose to escape from their everyday gamespace into yet more games? As the myriad lines of topology work their way into space, space mutates, and just as the allegorical moment changes from the topical to the topographic to the topological, so too does the utopian moment. One might think gamespace via both allegory (doubled as algorithm) and utopia (mutated into atopia). One reveals which could be, the other announcing what should be, both shifting and realigning as the space around us changes what it would be.

UTOPIA was a place to hide, where a topic could develop of its own accord, safe within the bounds of the book. There, life could begin again outside of conflict. Utopias do their best to expel violence. In a utopian text there is always a

barrier in space (distant and difficult terrain) or a barrier in time (intervening revolutions or Charles Fourier's cycles of epochs). But the real barrier is that troublesome line that divides what is on the page from what is outside it. Fredric Jameson: "I believe that we can begin from the proposition that Utopian space is an imaginary enclave within real social space, in other words, that the very possibility of Utopian space is itself a result of spatial and social differentiation." Except that utopia's enclave was not imaginary. It was tangible and material. Utopia is a place on a page where violence is pushed to the margin by the power of sheer description. Utopian socialist William Morris: "Success in besting our neighbors is a road to renown now closed."<sup>4</sup>

UTOPIA restricted itself to a particular topic (the topic of the page) and a particular line (the line of writing). The book is a line—a trajectory, a connection through time and space with certain qualities (see Fig. E). Among its qualities is the way it partitions off the smooth space of the page from the rough-and-tumble world without. It rules off from the world that special tempo where text plays its subtle games against its reader. In a utopia, other lines of communication are either nonexistent or subordinated to the descriptive power of the text. Utopian Communist A. A. Bogdanov: "The plays were either transmitted from distant large cities by means of audio visual devices, or—more usually—they were cinematic reproductions of plays performed long ago, sometimes so long ago that the actors themselves were already dead."<sup>5</sup> In this utopian *Red Star*,

topical	topographic	topological
utopia/dystopia	heterotopia	atopia
More's <i>Utopia</i>	Perec's <i>W</i>	<i>Vice City</i>

Fig. E

the new lines extend and enhance those of the text, rather than supersede them.

IT IS not that utopias alone create gulags. Adolf Eichmann was no utopian. He just kept the trains running on time—to the camps. His was a prosaic imagination, making topography match the text of his orders. The lines for implementing that kind of violence are the railway line, the telegraph line, and the line of punch cards passing through the tabulators—precursors to the digital computer. Holocaust historian Edwin Black: “When Germany wanted to identify the Jews by name, IBM showed them how.” In topography there is a whole nest of connections, along which flows information, radiating from the text, calling the world to order. There are lines for planning, managing, measuring. Topography is not only the means of producing spatial and social differentiation but of overcoming it, connecting a space of places with a space of flows. The first intimations of topology were those IBM Holerith tabulating machines which made space not only something that could be divided and connected by order but measured and managed by an algorithm.

WHEN the lines of telesthesia—telegraph, telephone, telecommunications—connect topics into a topographic space, extensively mapped and storied, utopia is recruited out of the page and comes out to play. Utopia unbinds, spreading its tendrils out of the book, along the lines of the topographic, into the world. Rather than a retreat from the world, showing in its positive creation of a new world what the actual one beyond its line lacks, utopia becomes something else. The book becomes an alibi for more worldly lines of communication, some with the power of an order: diagrams, memos, reports, telegrams. Utopia becomes part of something instrumental, but thereby loses its power. Topographic lines are there now to make the world over by the book, but in the process they make the book over as well, reducing it to just another line. The smooth plane of the blank page is the green-fields site for delineating a pure topography of the line. But that page could be any page—a page of a novel or of Eichmann's orders. Utopia's problem is not that it is bound to the page but that it is not bounded enough. Signs and images leak out of this bound-paper enclave and are captured by other powers, connected to flows along other lines.

THE POWER of topography is foreshadowed in dystopias. Russell Jacoby: “Utopias seek to emancipate by envisioning a world based on new, neglected, or spurned ideas; dystopias seek to frighten by accentuating contemporary trends that threaten freedom.”\* What they have in common is a belief in the power of the line of writing and the book as a topic, separate from but in a privileged relation

to the world. Utopias dream of what is possible within that topic as a critique of what is beyond it. Dystopias are the nightmare of the loss of power of the line of writing, overcome by other lines. Jack London, George Orwell, Aldous Huxley, Yevgeny Zamyatin—all recoil from the lines that supersede those of writing. Dystopians pay close attention to the control of topography by various lines of analog signal—radio, television—threading topics together, making space transparent to an all-seeing Big Brother or the cult of Ford.

**THE RISE** of dystopian forms might have less to do with the pernicious power of the utopian text than with the declining power of the text in general as a kind of line. Dystopian texts are the sign that the book has lost its capacity to function as a separate topic, from which to negate the world. Dystopias are writing's guilty conscience. Their secret utopia—like Winston Smith's diary in *1984*—is still the book. The failure of utopia might point to nothing so much as the inadequate properties of the lines employed to make it operational. The passage from utopian to dystopian texts charts the rise and fall of the book as the line that might negate this world through its positive description of another world. The book gave way to other lines, courtesy of IBM and other avatars of the military entertainment complex—creating topologies that colonized the world in different ways. All dystopian writing is also utopian. It cannot help reminding itself of the limits of writing and a lost world of the sovereign text before other lines sublimated its power.

**TOPOGRAPHY** learned to live without its utopias and settled in to a mundane resignation to the here-and-now. It assuaged its boredom in special times, special places, where different rules applied. Postwar play theorist Roger Caillois' answer to the Nazis was to build a postwar society with ample margins for games of agon mixed with games of chance (which he called *alea*). Each would have its proper place and time alongside but not above everyday life. This would be the antidote to the Nazi's toxic mix of two other kinds of play—intoxication and spectacle. Games of agon and *alea* would take place outside of the uncertainties of mundane time and space, in special zones where consistent rules apply. Such spaces are "heterotopias." Michel Foucault: "Their role is to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill-constructed and jumbled." Heterotopias are at some remove from the dull repetition of meaningless labors with incalculable purpose in workaday life. They are spaces and times that lie along other lines.\*

**HETEROTOPIAN** spaces are varied. Each has its own particular rules and seasons. There are heterotopias of bare necessity: prisons, hospitals, schools. These need not concern gamer theory much. More interesting are the heterotopias of useless luxury: galleries, arenas, sports domes. These in turn subdivide into heterotopias of aesthetic play and of calculated games. One is a space of pure qualities; the other, pure quantities. One creates new values; the other pits given values against one another. In one, the ideal is

that play is free; in the other, that the game is fair. In both heterotopias, these values have their limits. One is an artifice of rank; the other, of rank artifice.<sup>5</sup> Outside the heterotopia that makes their autonomy possible, they amount to nothing.

IIIIII HETEROTOPIAS of luxury, of a strictly artificial necessity, contain subdivisions of play and game, existing within their allotted times and spaces, which are in turn subdivided. The space of play contains separate worlds of literature, art, theater, cinema, even spaces for sexual play. These are now just “special topics,” ruled off from any larger ambitions for remaking the world. Aesthetic play tried again and again to break out of its heterotopia, to take the derangement of the senses into the streets, and again and again it failed. Guy Debord: “For Dadaism sought to abolish art without realizing it, and Surrealism sought to realize art without abolishing it. The critical position since worked out by the Situationists demonstrates that the abolition and the realization of art are inseparable aspects of a single transcendence of art.”<sup>6</sup> It was not to be. The heterotopian space of the art world abolished Debord’s Situationists instead by realizing “Situationism” entirely within the playpen of art history.

IIIIII HETEROTOPIAS of the game have never been of much interest to theory, whose practitioners have tended to view it as the place of the mob. Pat Kane: “The working class is also the playing class—and has always been so.” But to a gamer theory without such prejudices, heterotopias of the

game may be a key precursor to gamespace. Among them are separate worlds pitting different attributes of body and mind into contests of skill or luck, from badminton to backgammon. Every way of measuring what one body does against another—each finds its own special heterotopia, its field, its court, its track, its pitch, its arena. Defrocked Situationist Ralph Rumney: “It is now sport, not painting or sculpture, which defines the limits of the human, which offers a sense or image of wholeness, of a physical idea, which no honest art can now repeat.” Nor, need one add, can writing.<sup>7</sup>

NOT ONLY was aesthetic play no match for the game, but it ends up playing a subordinate role within the expansion of the game beyond a mere heterotopia. Art provides the images and stories for mediating between the gamer and gamespace. *Vice City*, for instance, is an algorithm wrapped in a landscape of visual splendor. One particularly pleasurable way of trifling with it is to steal a car and simply tool around in it. Tune the car radio to your favorite station and feel the sensuous shapes and forms of the city vector by. But generally, art is now in the service of the game. Rather than actual games played in actual arenas, art expands the reach of the game to imaginary games played in a purely digital realm, anywhere and everywhere, on every desktop and cell phone.

IF AESTHETIC play suffers from enclosure within heterotopian margins, the agon of games is leached out of its pure domains. Ralph Rumney didn’t count on 24-hour

sports channels, internet gambling, reality TV game shows, or the subtle, corrosive imposition of the digital gamespace on every aspect of life. Conceptual art is no match for conceptual sport, with its fantasy baseball teams and its perpetual pep talks urging everyone always to *Just do it!*—where “it” is stripped of any possibility not marked and measured in advance.

FOR A gamer theory, the genealogy of gamespace might pass through these heterotopias of the game more than those of play, and those of play more than those of necessity. Theory has been looking for the keys to contemporary life in all the wrong places. The playtime aesthetics of the avant garde of art yields to the “ludology” of gamespace. It was the genius of Caillois, the lapsed Surrealist, to grasp this. In topography, what he calls *alea* (chance) and *agon* (competition) become the dominant modes; intoxicating vertigo and dissimulating spectacle (what he calls *ilinx* and *mimesis*) become the minor modes. The obsessions of the Situationists—passive spectacle and active insurrection against it—form an obsolete couple, each drawing support in decline from the other. The action is elsewhere.

MOST OF the avant garde celebrate transgressive, sublime play, erupting beyond a rule-bound world. Post Situationist Alberto Iacovoni: “Play architecture must liberate space from topological chains.” The Oulipo group did the opposite. It preferred self-imposed rules, elegant as they were arbitrary, that might be conducive to new kinds of play. Rather than resist heterotopian marginality, they reveled

in it. Given that the passage from topographic to topological space eliminates even the margins within which heterotopias flourished, this might prove a more enduring gameplan for gamer theory. Oulipian novelist George Perec saw what was coming, in his late-dystopian creation of *W*, a textual island devoted only to total sport: “The life of an Athlete of *W* is but a single, endless, furious striving, a pointless, debilitating pursuit of that unreal instant when triumph can bring rest.” What Caillois sees as a win for civilization over the Nazis, Perec sees more darkly, as the triumph of *The Triumph of the Will*. Both enter the gamer theory hall of fame by providing it with its object—gamespace—and its critical impetus—the gamer’s odd attunement toward the game.<sup>9</sup>

NO UTOPIA pulls at the topological world, calling it away from itself. Even dystopian texts become marginal, confined to the playground of literary gamesmanship. The once discrete heterotopian spaces no longer coexist with everyday life, as compensation. Rather, gamespace seeps into everyday life, moving through its pores, transforming it in its own image, turning up everywhere from cell phone Tetris to your quarterly pension fund statement. Rather than a timeless utopian ideal where history ends, rather than the allotted hour of the heterotopian, everyday life now pulses constantly with moments of unrealized atopian promise. Everywhere, all the time, the gamer confronts the rival impulses of chance and competition, intoxication and spectacle, as homeopathic antidotes to a boredom that challenges being from within. In *Vice City* all of

Caillois' four kinds of play—chance and competition, intoxication and spectacle—come together. The destruction of the spectacle becomes the spectacle of destruction; the derangement of the senses becomes the arrangement of drug deals. In *Vice City* you chance your arm in an agon of all against all.

NO WORK of art can aspire to transcend this gamespace, which has realized art by suppressing its ambitions. Yet perhaps a game like *Vice City* can function as the negative of gamespace, its atopian shadow, in a parallel to the way that the very positivity of a utopia acts as a negation of the world outside its bounds. Not the least of the charms of *Vice City* is that while it appears to be about a life of crime, it is thoroughly law-abiding. It is a game about transgression in which it is not possible to break the rules. One may succeed in the game or fail, but one cannot really cheat. (Even the “cheats” are part of the rules.) This is the atopian dream of gamespace, where the lines are so dense, the digital so omnipresent, that any and every object and subject is in play, and all of space is a gamespace. Every move contrary to the rules of a given game is merely a move into another game. The game imagines topology perfected.

ATOPIA has one quality in common with utopia—its aversion to ambiguity. *Vice City* may take place in a dark world of guns and drugs, but every mission produces an exact and tangible reward. If your mission is to find porn stars Candy and Mercedes, you drive to the right location, dispatch some body guards, chase Candy's pimp, run him

over, return to pick up Candy, drive to the pizza joint, collect Mercedes, drive them both to the Studio and deliver them to the director. Your reward is always exactly one thousand dollars. If utopia thrives as an architecture of qualitative description, and brackets off quantitative relations, atopia renders all descriptions arbitrary. All that matters is the quantitative relations. By excluding relations, utopia excludes violence; by privileging relations, atopia appears as nothing but violence, but only because it excludes instead any commitment to stable description. Anything that matters can be transformed in precise and repeatable ways into something else. The relentless working out of the algorithm leaves behind a carnage of signs, immolated in the transformation of one value into another.

THE RULES of *Vice City* call for a vast accumulation of cash, cars, and cronies, of weapons and real estate. Most of these activities are outside the law, but law is just part of a larger algorithm. In any case, the story and the art are arbitrary, mere decoration. If in utopia everything is subordinated to a rigorous description, a marking of space with signs, in atopia nothing matters but the transitive relations between variables. The artful surfaces of the game are just a way for the gamer to intuit their way through the steps of the algorithm. Hence the paradox of *Vice City*. Its criminal world is meant to be shocking to the literary or cinematic imagination, where there is still a dividing line between right and wrong and where description is meant to actually describe something. But to a gamer, it's just a means to discover an algorithm. *Vice City's* post-film noir world implies not that

one can step back from it into the light but that while driving around and around in it one can discover the algorithm to which gamespace merely aspires and by which it is to be judged in its entirety.

11211 IN *Vice City*, the world exists already made over as a complete gamespace, an atopia. It is not “nowhere” (utopia) or “elsewhere” (heterotopia), but “everywhere” (atopia). Far from being new-fangled neologism, “atopian” is a word Plato used to describe the philosophical cruising of his Socrates, passing in and out of various niches of Athenian life, playing illicit word-games with the champions of each. In *Vice City*, the various spaces already have the required properties of a certain kind of play. The space itself, rather than the gamer who crosses it, is already atopian. Hidden on *Vice City*'s islands are one hundred secret packages. Some are Downtown, some are in Little Havana, some in Little Haiti, some on the golf course, some at the airport. Collect them all and you can trade in even your best motor vehicles for the ultimate ride. Or if that is not your preferred goal, pick another one. Either way, the qualities of space always guide you to its real values, which always have a score. This space is perfect, seamless—and bounded, like Thomas More's *Utopia*. And just as the utopia points to what is lacking beyond the page, so too atopia points to what is lacking beyond the game. Atopian space is a real enclave within imaginary social space. The possibility of atopian space is a result of the impossibility of adequate and effective spatial and social quantification and calculation.

81111 FOR QUITE opposite reasons, the utopian text and the atopian game both stand accused of incitements to violence. What if the atopian game, like the utopian book, is merely the scapegoat? What if the book was merely a harmless repository of the potential of the line that was already imprinting itself on the world? What if the game is merely a repository of a new potential of the line? In utopian books, the writing shows the everyday world transformed as only writing can transform it. The utopian book merely pushes writing's abilities the furthest, to a point of almost complete consistency, within the special topic of the book. The atopian game, likewise, is the algorithmic in a more complete and consistent form. Neither book nor game is ever wholly complete and consistent. They always negotiate with what is beyond their bounds. In *Vice City* as in More's *Utopia* there is a traveler who mediates between one world and another. In either case, the utopian book or the atopian game lacks the power to transform the world. But where signs and images may bleed off the utopian page into the world, the algorithm of the game, in which each relation depends on one another, may not. At least not yet.

11211 IT IS not the “content” of *Vice City* that might give a gamer theorist cause to pause. It really contains no sex, no violence, no drugs, no guns. These are merely the art—the images and stories—via which the game mediates between what is within its own purely algorithmic line and what is a less-than-perfect topology inside which the gamer lives. Rather, it is the form of the game itself, and its

compromises with a world beyond, that can work as the topos of a critical gamer theory. The atopian game, like the utopian book, expresses what has the power to remake the world of its time, but is not itself that power. It is a useless, impotent form of a powerful line. Which is why critical theory best becomes gamer theory, and why gamer theory best becomes critical. The critical attaches itself to *what* power is but not *where* it is. It attaches itself to power in a powerless form. The atopian game is exactly the site that has this ambiguous property when things reach the topological level, when the lines run everywhere through space and everything is coming together as potential for digital calculation.

IN GAMES, as in gamespace, some calculations happen quicker than others. Sometimes there is a moment to think it over, negotiate. Sometimes not. When there is no time for calculation, the gamer must act on the basis of a calculation made in advance. There's always a backstory, providing some dividing line along which to weigh one's interests. It's never quite as "decision science," such as rational choice theory or game theory proper, would predict. The gamer is rarely an autonomous agent, acting on rational self-interest. If game theory is objective, rational, abstract, gamer theory is subjective, intuitive, particular. If game theory starts with the self-contained agent, like a prisoner in a cell, calculating the odds against a disciplinary world, gamer theory wonders how the agency of the gamer comes into being as something distinct in the first place. In the midst of battle, how does the gamer decide

when and where to pull the trigger? The atopia of the game is a safe haven in which to enact the problem of being as it appears in gamespace, but without the oppressive stakes of one's own life on the line.

EVERYDAY life once had the resources to resist, adapt, appropriate, or embrace utopian schemes. It pushed the promise and threat of other ways of being off into the corner, while it got on with the business of wresting freedom from necessity, building a world in which to dwell. With the very success of that effort comes a renewed challenge to its resourcefulness. Having developed a topography in which to dwell, mined and molded from raw possibility by collective labor, boredom rises to a new pitch, and the heterotopian pastimes become more than a mere recompense for a dull life. They become the driving force of development itself. Out of the heterotopian games of chance and competition arise the atopias of gamespace, via which topology makes itself known to us, as an ever more intricate matrix of the digital line.<sup>3</sup> Both the prisoner's dilemma of game theory and Foucault's theory of disciplinary power begin and end in dystopian dungeons. They offer no account of the new forms of power and being which arise out of the transformation of the line from the topographic to the topological. Too much dungeon, not enough *Dungeons & Dragons*. The power of theory falters on the theory of power. It's not that theory, even a gamer theory, can achieve all that much when confronted with the digital indifference of gamespace, but it might aspire at least to describe what being now is.