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**Title:** Disruptive conflicts in computopic space: Japanese sf videogames as sources of otherness and radical political imagination  
**Issue Date:** 2014-08-27
7 Alien Aesthetics

Ultimately perhaps, [...] the alien, fully assimilated, its Difference transmuted into Identity, will simply become a capitalist like the rest of us. (Jameson 2007, 141)

Sensual expression is an important element of the computopic space. To the extent to which it involves visual, sonic, or haptic signals, gameplay is also accompanied by an aesthetic experience. The term aesthetic experience is at the centre of a vivid discourse about the possibility of novelty; a discourse which is concerned with whether we can literally imagine or experience something new. The following chapter asks if and how the computopic space can contribute to novel aesthetic expression and experience. In doing so, I am not asking whether videogames are beautiful or artistic. This question has been addressed by several recent inquiries, which discuss videogames as art.102 Rather, the analysis focuses primarily on the sensorial experience of gameplay and the interaction of the player with the computopic world and its inhabitants, asking what conflicts arise from it and how they might influence and stimulate our political ideas, thoughts and visions.

7.1 Aesthetics and Politics

The aesthetic experience itself is characterized by a paradoxical relationship between immediate sensual perception and mediate aesthetic judgment about what is perceived. Thomas Munro and Roger Scruton (2010, no pn) summarize this paradox in an entry on “Aesthetics” in the Encyclopedia Britannica Online as follows:

[The expression aesthetic judgment seems to be a contradiction in terms, denying in the first term precisely that reference to rational considerations that it affirms in the second. [...] On the one hand, aesthetic experience is rooted in the immediate sensory enjoyment of its object through an act of perception. On the other, it seems to reach beyond enjoyment toward a meaning that is addressed to our reasoning powers and that seeks judgment from them.]
As the entry explains, this contradiction has attracted the attention of many philosophers. Some have, for example, attempted to bridge the two by invoking the imagination. The difficulty, vagueness and complexity of the issue is hinted at in the evaluation the entry offers of such attempts: “[E]ven if we find this general invocation of imagination, as the ‘synthesizing force’ within perception, vacuous or unilluminating, we may yet feel that the imagination has some special role to play in aesthetic experience.”

This chapter does not intend to offer an account of the theoretical relation between the aesthetic experience and the imagination in general. Rather, it limits its attention to those moments in which the aesthetic experience can be a site of disruptive conflicts and novelty. Aesthetic conflicts or aesthetic novelty are not only stimuli for political imagination in an abstract sense. Jacques Rancière points out that aesthetics is also a direct condition and limitation for political action. Rancière (2008, 34) regards politics as a conflict about the nature and demarcation of a common space, about defining common objects and identifying those who possess the ability to a common language, in a general sense of the word. He calls this division of space “distribution of the sensible,” meaning “the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it” (Rancière 2004, 12). In his view, our concept of aesthetics is such a distribution, “a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience. Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time” (13).

For Rancière, both politics and art aim to (re)define the boundaries of this common space. “Politics and art, like forms of knowledge, construct ‘fictions’, that is to say material rearrangements of signs and images, relationships between what is seen and what is said, between what is done and what can be done” (Rancière 2004, 39, see also Rancière 2008, 35). In plain terms, the distribution of the sensible influences the common space we perceive as field of political action, as well as the action we perceive as possible in this space. Political action and aesthetic experience, in turn, have an effect on this distribution and may shift it towards formerly politically irrelevant or even unknown realms. The question is, whether aesthetic conflicts in the computopic space can contribute to such shifts.
in the boundaries of what is perceived as common, thus stimulating novel, radical imagination and respective action.

Once again, the underlying question is, if and how novelty or, in this case, ‘aesthetic Otherness’ is possible. Rancière emphasizes the discriminatory function of the aesthetic distribution of the sensible, but does, as far as I can see, not give a clear answer to the question if the invisible is non-existent or only not relevant. In other words, he remains vague about the possibility of absolute Otherness. As already mentioned (see chapter 2, p. 11), Jameson expresses doubts about the possibility of absolute Otherness more explicitly. In the context of aesthetics, he reiterates these doubts, stating that “a new quality already begins to demand a new kind of perception, and that new perception in turn a new organ of perception, and thus ultimately a new kind of body” (Jameson 2007, 120). His introductory quote questions our ability to imagine the Other in the first place. With this sceptical challenge in mind, the following sections examine a series of potentially novel aesthetic experiences in videogames. More specifically, I turn to representations of the alien as one of the most radical and, as Goto-Jones (2010, 22) observes, literal encounters with science fictional Otherness.

7.2 The Alien in Computopic Space
Discussing the possibility of radical Otherness in Stanislaw Lem’s science fiction, Jameson (2007, 116-117) concludes that radically alien life can only be contacted, perceived and imagined at the cost of replacing its unknowability and absolute, non-communicable Otherness with anthropocentrism. In order to make sense of the unintelligible alien covering Solaris, we have to apply known categories like friend/enemy. Even “in imagining ourselves to be attempting contact with the radically Other, we are in reality merely looking in a mirror” (111). In Lem’s The Invincible, on the other hand, we are confronted with a seemingly radical combination of “intelligent non-organic” crystals. Yet, a closer look reveals that they are, in some way, also a product and thus connected to human ideas of production and the limitation of our imagination to human artifice (113-115). The only successful strategy against the impossibility of knowing and representing the alien Jameson (140) refers to explicitly, is a consequently partial representation, as found in the film Alien, in which the audience never sees more than parts of the creature.

Adam Roberts (2006) does not reject the possibility of radical Otherness as
vehemently as Jameson and at the same time puts a stronger emphasis on the emotional quality of the alien. Discussing the film *Blade Runner*, he claims that the “combination of human, childlike innocence and ingenuousness with a machine-like strength and ruthlessness […] provides the replicants with their uncanny metaphoric potency.” Roberts identifies a more extreme example in the Borg of the *Star Trek* universe, which “represent everything the Federation is not, focusing our attention on the way their mode of being is literally beyond our ability to comprehend” (118). For him, the Borg represent “the true nature of ‘otherness’; an alien […] radically and totally unlike you or me or anything we can conceive. […] It is impossible for us to enter imaginatively into the world of the Borg because certain key values we hold, values like individuality, life/death and so on, are too centrally part of us, whereas for the Borg they are neither good nor bad but simply irrelevant” (121-123).

Both authors thus express the idea that the alien as a radical Other is only possible in the impossibility of representation, intelligibility, or imagination. This negative existence of the alien points to a central tension in the idea of disruptive conflicts. In his *Alien Autopsy*, Goto-Jones (2010) argues that science fiction, as a reflexive, critical genre in Suvin’s and Jameson’s sense, requires the alien to be cognitively estranging, but familiar enough to ensure continuity and to serve as a mirror for critical self-reflection that points toward innovation. “SF aliens should not be so very alien after all: we should recognize ourselves (and the possibilities of ourselves) in them, otherwise they do not estrange us they simply alienate us” (23). On the one hand, this points to the requirement of some kind of familiarity, or, what I have referred to as plausibility. On the other hand, it points to the limitations of the familiar to estrangement and critique. I have identified the question, if these limitations can be overcome, as a question of the possibility of novelty generated by disruptive conflicts. The problem for the analysis of the alien then is, how and how far disruption can reach into the realm of novel alienation without losing its plausibility, and how much it is ‘confined’ to critical estrangement.

The alien itself remains a vague term, beyond its appearance as a “literal” site of the tension between sensual immediacy and aesthetic judgment. In this sense, once could be tempted to regard it as equivalent with the term Otherness, with which I generally refer to novel differences from our known empirical reality. However, this abstract feature is an element of all computopic spaces to a certain extent, because they offer us worlds detached from our common experience. The
alien is used here as a more specific case of Otherness. As such, it combines the aesthetic dimension of sensuous experience and interaction that interests me in this chapter, with the element of life as a common denominator in all above-mentioned discussions and arguably the most promising source of disruption. As such, the alien embodies the tension between familiarity and alienation: plausible to the extent to which it appears as life, and disruptive to the extent to which its ‘living’ is utterly different from ours. In my subjective evaluation of the alien and its difference in the following sections, I am guided by my own experience and the few vague indicators Jameson and Roberts offer, namely contact or interaction, intelligibility, imagination, and emotional impact.

A brief look at the potentials and limitations of the computopic for expressing alien life helps to focus the exploration. In the computopic space, objects are enacted by the computer. In the sense that many objects feature some kind of action in the shape of routines, a formal distinction between a door and an attacking enemy is quite difficult. This does, however, not imply that one needs to invoke the perspective of “object-oriented ontology” (OOO), which regards all objects as equal on an ontological level (for a short description, see a post by Ian Bogost on his blog from December 8 Bogost 2009). Instead, the notion of disruption demands for inquiring how this action is experienced as living.

Beyond action and movement in general, many designers have been concerned with the responsiveness of the videogame world and its inhabitants. Whether based on rigid routines and algorithms, or on an ever more complex and sophisticated artificial intelligence, designers often attempt to simulate life in games. Real-time strategy games and first-person shooters show the evolution of variable and procedural elements in videogames most explicitly, confronting the player with seemingly intelligent, human-like opponents and realistic environments. Given

103 For Japan, Tane Kiyoshi (2011, 23-24) observes how Otherness [tashasei] and its representation was already an important aspect of games at an early stage. He traces its first evolution to the transition between Breakout and Space Invader, showing how the latter turned the fix block obstacles of the former into a ‘actively’ attacking [nōdōteki ni kōgeki shite kuru] enemy who thinks for itself. A similar evolution can probably be observed in the history of videogame design elsewhere as well. This desire for intelligent Otherness later focused much attention on the growing field of artificial intelligence.

104 In a talk about “The Future of Game, AI, and Computer Graphics” at the annual meeting of the Digital Games Research Association Japan (DIGRA Japan) in Kyōto on February 25, 2012, Square Enix’ lead A.I. researcher Miyake Yōichiro (2012) discussed recent trends in game A.I., pointing out that in the pursuit of realism that characterizes a share of the contemporary first-person shooters, artificial intelligence is more and more ‘humanized’ by adding accidental mistake routines. At the same time, he showed how the environment is
the absolute superiority so-called “bots” theoretically have in videogame worlds over the human player, the ways in which the A.I. systems are restricted in order to make them human-like, and to provide a challenging but manageable task for the inferior human player, can certainly be a very interesting field for philosophical inquiries. However, this is not the place for such endeavour, because this thesis is more interested in the concrete ways in which the responsiveness and Otherness A.I. systems and videogame objects in general facilitate alienate us and question our common experience of human behaviour. In other words, the focus of this analysis has to be on the disruptive qualities the alien has in its ‘non-humanness.’

As argued above, expressions of movement, rules or routines, and action cannot be divorced from their representation. This means that we need to take a closer look at the representation of the alien. As mentioned above (see chapter 2, p. 26), computopic representation is partial and transformative, because it shows only a part of the entire world at once, and reduces the data to a humanly perceivable amount. With regards to the latter, Manovich (2002, no pn) argues that the transformation maps phenomena that are beyond the limits of human senses and reasoning into a representation “whose scale is comparable to the scales of human perception and cognition.” It remains to be seen whether this potential for partial or non-representation can have similar effects to the partial representation in Alien referred to by Jameson. It seems at least theoretically possible that the alien is comprised of complex data beyond our comprehension of life, only pointed to vaguely by its representation. More so, since I have argued that computopic worlds and their representations are also partly unimagined—that is, not predicted by the designer in every detail in advance (see chapter 2, p. 32)

Lastly, against the background of Jameson’s emphasis on the impossibility of contacting the alien, the analysis has to pay attention to the ways in which the computopic facilitates interaction with such life. Frequently, gameplay is described with reference to cybernetics and Donna Haraway’s (1991, 150) influential Cyborg Manifesto, in which she develops the idea of the hybrid “cyborg as a fiction mapping our social and bodily reality and as an imaginative resource increasingly enhanced by intelligent behaviour of animals and plants.

105 Manovich’s reference to life may not be a coincidence. In his conclusion, he claims that “the real challenge of data art is not about how to map some abstract and impersonal data into something meaningful and beautiful – economists, graphic designers, and scientists are already doing this quite well. The more interesting and at the end maybe more important challenge is how to represent the personal subjective experience of a person living in a data society.” (Manovich 2002)
suggesting some very fruitful couplings.”

Jon Dovey and Helen Kennedy (2006, 109), for example, claim that “[i]n the lived enactment of gameplay, there is no player separate to the interface and game world; there is a fusion of the two into a cyborigan subjectivity – composed of wires, machines, code and flesh.” In their view, the avatar is a cyborigan representation of the player character and the player actions, the sonic, haptic, and visual experience of which is communicated to the player (112).

This claim has to be re-examined carefully. Firstly, because it presupposes the empirical validity of Haraway’s cyborg—a claim Haraway (1991, 149) herself does not make about her self-declared “ironic dream” or “ironic political myth.” Secondly, because it could imply that the player is not aware of his or her separation from the computopic. Both theoretically and based on my own experience as a player, such generalization is problematic and questionable. Games can certainly offer an intense experience that makes the player forget his or her surroundings. However, this focus on the events in the game does not imply that the player (subjectivity) has merged with the avatar in any psychological or emotional way, let alone materially. This thesis is not the right forum to discuss these issues in depth, because their empirical analysis would require a decisively different methodology.

Given my focus on aesthetic experiences as stimuli to our radical imagination, my main interest rather lies in the possibilities of aesthetic Otherness in the computopic space. This brief discussion highlighted several important dimensions of the alien and its computopic possibility, and pointed to a series of possible directions and questions for the analysis. With these in mind, and with the necessary scepticism about Otherness, I would like to turn to the games *Rez* (2001), *The

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106 For Haraway (1991, 149), the cybernetic organism is a symbol for the hybridity of human being and technology in fiction and lived experience “that changes what counts as women’s experience in the late twentieth century.” Its hybridity stems from its resolute commitment to “partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity. It is oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence. No longer structured by the polarity of public and private, the cyborg defines a technological polis based partly on a revolution of social relations in the oikos, the household” (151).

107 This is generally discussed by terms like immersion and “flow.” According to the influential work of psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1996, 110), flow refers to an “optimal experience” in an “almost automatic, effortless, yet highly focused state of consciousness,” which is experienced by diverse people in diverse activities such as sports, art, or work. Games and videogames appear highly compatible with flow, because they share many of its core conditions or elements listed by Csikszentmihalyi, for example clear goals, immediate feedback, a balance between challenges and skills, a merging of action and awareness, the exclusion of distractions from consciousness, no worry of failure, the disappearance of self-consciousness, a distortion of the sense of time, and that the activity becomes autotelic (111-113).

7.3 Minimal Response and Uncanny Indifference

A particularly uncanny expression of the alien can be found in the low-budget production The Earth Defense Force (hereafter EDF).\(^\text{108}\) According to Inoue Akito (2012, 159-160), the game is a masterpiece of game design because it is easy to learn due to its simple rules, involves an impressive enemy, and offers a rewarding experience.

Shortly after starting up EDF, the player character is attacked by a herd of giant ants which cover the screen completely. This in itself already makes the game a masterpiece, but in addition, the confused player can easily succeed in fighting off the enemies by pressing random buttons, and is commended to do this via radio. Before knowing what is going on, the player starts to feel like the protagonist in a monster movie. […] In the first five minutes, one learns how to play and gets a taste of the core attractiveness of the game." (160, my translation)

As Example 7.1 shows, EDF is a minimalist game that confronts the player with an uncanny enemy invader and requires scarcely more than to move and pull the trigger. The uncanny effect of the ants is first of all created by their size and number, by which they literally penetrate our sight, sometimes covering all the world from the player’s eyes. Compared to the properly UFO-like space ships the game features, the ants are by far the most alien objects present, although they are modelled after a well-known life-form in our environment. This is not only a result of the appearance, but to a greater extent stems from their seemingly uncoordinated, insect-like movement and their unintelligible mind-set, which, despite their invasive intentions, seems to be programmed for random aggression, as Example 7.2 shows.

The ants are an invading force, which cannot be reasoned with. At the same time,
they appear strangely disoriented and disinterested and may attack the player from far away, run him over or simply pass him by. This internal contradiction in the artificial alien intelligence between the signalled intention of invading earth and the disinterested, seemingly random movement, is the main source of much of the disruption experienced in the gameplay. It is emphasized by the lack of choice on the side of the player, for whom effective extinction is the only meaningful action in the game. In order to proceed to the next stage, the player has to eradicate the enemy to the last ant—while the invading insects sometimes seem quite content with aimlessly crawling through the empty streets of Tokyo. In addition, they move more freely through the environment than the player and occupy it more totally, due to their agility, size, and numbers. The destruction to man-made architecture is mostly caused by the player and the collateral or intentional damage he inflicts. By confronting us with this kind of imbalance, EDF not only amplifies the uncanny experience of the alien, but also disrupts the player, who is—deprived of any alternatives to shooting—alienated from the openness and emergent quality of human life in an entertaining way.

A similar minimalist tendency is at work in a different, arguably more radical way in Rez. The on-rail shooter charges the player with hacking the cyberbrain space [dennō kūkan] of a futuristic computer system called “Project-K,” in order to re-active its A.I. “eden.” According to the designer’s description, eden went to sleep to escape from the overwhelming information in the overpopulated and uncontrollable size of the network society the management of which it was created for (game manual for Rez, 2-3). A critically acclaimed game on the border to responsive videogame art, the music-infused shooter “blurs the line between user input and audio/visual feedback, creating a unique sensory experience” (Giant Bomb Wiki 2013). Rez features a distinctive artistic style based on responsive polygon and wireframe representations and sound effects triggered by the player’s

109 Where else should the last stand of humanity in a Japanese game take place? Still, EDF shows how the implicit or explicit nationalism in many videogames—which is not limited to Japanese productions—takes on a rather parodist notion. Such (possibly unintended) effect is even stronger in other titles of the Simple2000 Series, such as THE Saigo no Nihonhei: Utsukushiki Kokudo Dakkan Sakusen [The last Japanese Soldier: taking back the beautiful home land] (2007), in which the player has to reclaim the Japanese prefectures one by one against an overwhelming number of enemy soldiers—with each prefecture offering regional food specialties to collect in the way to victory.

110 Rez was developed by SEGA’s United Game Artists and released by SEGA for the Dreamcast and the PS2. In 2008, lead producer Mizuguchi Tetsuya released an HD version for the XBOX 360.
actions, along with a trance soundtrack that grows complex with each new “layer” the player accesses in an area. “All of the environments move and fluctuate with the beat, adding to the synaesthesic effect of the game” (Giant Bomb Wiki 2013, see also Wark 2007, or Wikipedia 2013n). The game manual itself advertises this experience as follows:

Gentlemen, open your senses. Go to Synaesthesia. You can transform the world into your original Sounds, Lights and Vibrations just by locking and shooting the enemies. You will discover the [sic] brand new time full of rhythm as well as ecstasy. The instinct “Rez” is now finally being released. Can you really tear yourself from this sense of trance? (game manual for Rez, Coverpage)111

Example 7.3 shows that Rez goes beyond deploying abstract, minimalist art112 in order to represent the computer network. This alone would hardly be innovative in times where, as Manovich (2002) puts it, the fact that in computer media anything can be mapped to anything makes specific choices appear arbitrary.113 Rather, despite its rigid patterns and on-rails character, Rez is emergent in its responsiveness to player input, which is mapped dynamically onto the sensual expression of the game world. This is a distinct feature widely acclaimed. “[W]hat sets this game apart from all others of its ilk is that with every lock on, every shot fired, and every missile deployed, a sound is made that is tonally aligned with the music and synched up with the beat. In addition to the enemies all having these attributes, this creates the effect of the user essentially improvising the song as they play” (Giant Bomb Wiki 2013). In other words, the synaesthetic quality of Rez is derived from its dynamic representation of contingent player input.

In addition, the game features a numerical element based on a hidden rule-set. Contrary to the initial impression, the game world is vast and offers long-time engagement, if the player is willing to play repetitively.114

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111 According to the Wikipedia (2013t) entry on “synaesthesia,” the term refers to a perceptual variety, due to which someone experiences a sensory or cognitive stimulation involuntarily in a second sensory or cognitive pathway. Artistically, synaesthesia is used to refer to multi-sensory experiments or the simultaneous perception of multiple stimuli.

112 The game’s designer acknowledges the influence of Wassily Kandinsky (see Sotenga et al. 2012), who is known for his experiments with synaesthetic art.

113 The world in Rez does not at all appear arbitrary—rather, the “synaesthetic” is a result of a conscious combination of highly compatible styles (trance music, abstract polygon visuals, wireframe environments).

114 Wark (2007, 138) claims that “[t]he only real problem with Rez is that it does not have enough levels. Victory is temporary, or rather temporal. You can defeat time in the game,
stages and modes, which are only accessible after outstanding performances in other areas (see Appendix B and C). Such achievement becomes increasingly difficult and requires training and concentration. Thus, it is in stark contrast to the experience of effortless action or “flow” the game offers in an early stage. However, this oscillation between a rigorous regime of numerical data, calculation, and precision, and a playfulness of sensual aesthetics is a powerful and arguably unmatched representation of the computopic and its Otherness.

In the gameplay, “analysis” is not only a part of the score displayed after each level, but literally the way the player approaches the sensual explosion on the screen: one permanently tries to distinguish threat levels and to identify power-up items on time. I have referred to this kind of analytic but strangely unfocused gameplay in an earlier chapter as intense reception in distraction (see chapter 5, p. 78). However, by generating a tension between the analytic gameplay and the synaesthetic pleasures of its responsive environment, Rez offers a direct opposition between the two elements of aesthetic experience and generates a distinct representation of the unknowable inside of a computer network. This tension is amplified and at the same time resolved—one is tempted to say synthesizes—in the so-called “Trance Mission,” which has to be unlocked with considerable effort.

As Example 7.4 shows, the Trance Mission abandons the game itself, confronting the player with a never-ending cyber-space in which neither goal nor death exists. Deprived of the avatar, the player plays without aim, risking to be trapped in the experience, as Axem Rangers (2002) remarks in his review of the game:

> Quite possibly the coolest, most original of these unlockables is the hidden area Trance Mission. It’s an endless, repeating mode where the enemies fly in very simple patterns and don’t attack. It sounds boring, and it is for a few minutes. But after a few repeats of all the enemy patterns, you literally begin to fall into a trance. You zone out. You play without thinking. Your eyelids become heavy. Play Trance Mission for too long, and it’s hard to stop...

In a leap into absolute Otherness, both the player and the usually threatening enemies abandon any intentionality and engage in a synaesthetic dance in a space beyond. In experimenting with the boundary between games and art, Rez offers
an enclave for the experience of play as “to-and-fro movement without aim” (see Gadamer in chapter 2, p. 17). For Adorno (2001a, 116), the “uselessness” of art is in itself already a political critique in a world defined by functional purpose (see also Geuss 1998, 302). In the context of this chapter, I propose to refine this general statement by arguing that the uselessness of this experience is only meaningful in the context of the tense computopic universe in which it is situated. This meaning is amplified not only by the general tension between experience and analysis, but also by the vocabulary of nature and evolution deployed in other areas and particularly in area 5, in which not only the sound becomes more complex, but also the landscape grows, as Figure 18 shows.

Figure 18. Emergent nature in Rez area 5.

Here, the game comes close to “Artificial Life art,” which is marked by “[a] general desire […] to capture, harness or simulate the generative and ‘emergent’ qualities of ‘nature’—of evolution, co-evolution and adaptation” (Penny 2010, 197). Against the background of these references to biological life and the hostile nature of the computer network in most areas, the Trance Mission not only disrupts our sense of purpose usually applied to everyday life. Presenting its players with a disinterested, rigid, non-responsive alien life, it also alienates them from the game itself, risking to bore them immediately with its playfulness. Contrary to this risk, Axem Rangers’ above-cited description of the experience points to the fact that this space can successfully invite the player to become part of it.
7.4 Absolute Terror and Uncanny Love

A very different kind of alienation is generated by the numerical representations of the mental and emotional condition of characters in *Shinseiki Evangelion 2* (hereafter *Eva2*). Roughly adapting the hybridity of its source anime, the game offers a total of 11 scenarios, most of which explore perspectives not focused on in the anime, or expand on it, as well as several endings depending on the player’s actions. Most scenarios consist of multiple chapters, each of which is divided into a “combat turn” and a “free turn.” The combat turn features the fights between the huge, manned “artificial human Evangelion” (hereafter Eva) and the attacking “angels” which threaten to extinguish humanity.

Whereas the combat-turn offers a rather conventional gameplay-experience, the free turn allows the player to navigate the scenario’s protagonist in third-person perspective through the space of the futuristic stronghold city Tokyo-3. *Eva2* features a variety of places familiar from the anime, such as NERV officer Katsuragi Misato’s mansion, pilot Ayanami Rei’s apartment, the school all pilots attend, a convenience store, and several rooms within the NERV headquarters. The player can explore and use these facilities in order to satisfy basic needs like food and an occasional bath, purchase various items in the convenience store, study for school or hack the computers of the military headquarter NERV in search for confidential data. More than anything, the environment is a social space, populated by human-like non-player characters (hereafter *npc*)—characters controlled by the computer. Interactions with and among these characters range from looking and small talk...
Contrary to the initial expectation, the alien in *Eva2* is not encountered in the fights against the angels, but in the uncanny interactions with non-player characters, in which the player is confronted with a tension between the characters’ human-like appearance and their abstracted numerical character. This tension is present in many games, but in *Eva2*, it appears particularly uncanny and alienating. In order to explain the disruptive quality of these interactions, I would like to give a brief overview of their most important elements. A first of these elements is that the characters feature numerical variables, which represent their momentary emotional state, their feelings towards and their evaluation of other characters. The most important of these variables is the so-called “Absolute Terror” (hereafter A.T.) value, which, in contrast to the anime and manga\(^{118}\), is described as a kind of tension barometer by the game (game manual for *Eva2*, 6).\(^{119}\)

The A.T. is an important factor in the combat turn, where it influences the Eva’s fighting strength, but also in the free turn, where it affects the interaction with other characters. Generally speaking, the A.T. changes with the character’s well-being (hunger, thirst, sleepiness, toilet, and shower), the course and outcome of the fights, and, most importantly, the social interactions. For easier understanding, *Example 7.5* presents some general interactions. Over time, it tends towards a neutral value, which itself decreases with passivity and increases if the A.T. is kept high over longer periods. In other words, in order to raise the A.T., the player has to fulfil his characters needs and participate in social life continuously. Such participation also provides opportunities to raise the npcs’ A.T. as well (see Nakajima, Kariya, and Miyazaki 2004, 26-27).

These numerical variables are directly linked to a second novum, namely the multiple-choice system called “Intelligent Material” (hereafter I.M.), which serves as the basis for the interactions with npcs (but also between them). *Neon Genesis Evangelions: The Complete Guide* (Nakajima, Kariya, and Miyazaki 2004, 188-251, my translation) lists 732 distinct I.M. commands, including anything from “look at XX” and “kiss XX” to “go to the toilet,” “hack the computer,” or “stop being a pilot.” Interaction with npcs or between them is generally conducted in an

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\(^{118}\) For a comparison with the manga and the anime, see Li, Nakamura and Roth (2013).

\(^{119}\) In guidebooks it is also referred to as an indicator for the character’s general attitude and behaviour, ranging roughly between passive and active (Nakajima, Kariya, and Miyazaki 2004, 26-27) or “something like the confidence for leading a life in society” (Katō and Tamura 2003, 30, my translation).
oscillating fashion, each character having a choice between up to four commands per turn. This choice is made by the game system based on several factors. Firstly, the distance between the characters influences the range of possible interactions. As I have visualized in Figure 19, this distance is divided into far, middle and close range, delimited against anything out of range (like very far, not in sight or busy characters).

Figure 19. Distances in Eva2. Adapted from the Complete Guide (Nakajima, Kariya, and Miyazaki 2004, 16).

The shorter the distance, the more ‘physical’ the interaction can become. Secondly, the numerous variables the characters are equipped with, such as the A.T. and npcs’ opinion of the protagonist [jinbutsuhyōka], which consist of the three variables friendship [yūjō], love [aijō] and affection [shināi], have a major influence on the I.M.

Another influential element is the respective characters’ bodily condition. In the case of the protagonist, unfulfilled basic needs might limit the interaction possibilities, in extreme cases lead to complete inability to do anything but eat, drink, go to the toilet, or shower. Npcs tend to more grumpy moods when they are
interrupted in fulfilling their own basic needs. Forth, the “emotional state” of the player character has an influence on the interaction possibilities. In contrast to the evaluation of the protagonist by other characters, which can be accessed from the I.M. menu, his or her own emotional state is not visible to the player and can only be guessed from earlier interactions.

Likewise, the npc responses to the player character’s actions or communication depend on their set of conditions, variables and evaluations, including all of the above, but also a short- and long-term memory of earlier encounters. The quality of the interaction is dynamically reflected in the variables. Roughly speaking, one might say that dislike of the player character or a bad emotional state of the npc lower the chance of ‘successful’ interactions—success meaning either a raise in the A.T. or a strengthening of the personal relationship with an npc. Although the general evaluation of the player character varies among the npcs and depending on the scenario selected, all npcs can be potential targets to both aims. In either case, these various factors that influence the success and progression of an interaction hint at the difficulty of choosing action and reaction, which have to be carefully weighed against the known and suspected condition of the npc, the momentary situation, and their potential reaction to certain approaches. The numerous, partially hidden variables and the computer-controlled I.M. turn the universe of Eva2 into a playing field for calculated, but never fully predictable social interactions.

In their numerical, calculated way, these interactions are an uncanny experience.

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120 The A.T. value influences the overall chances to win against the invading angels. Even non-pilots have direct or indirect influence on the battle. Katsuragi Misato, for example is responsible for strategic and tactical decisions. Akagi Ritsuko develops new weapon systems and other helpful technologies if her A.T. stays above a certain limit. However, fan-based discussions of the game reveal that raising the A.T. in preparation for battle is only one possible approach to the free turn. Engaging in romantic relationships with npcs is arguably an equally if not more popular aim among players (suba 2005a).

121 Notably, some factors diversify the characters with regards to their ‘numerical behaviour.’ For example, it is more difficult to influence the A.T. and other variables of older characters like Ikari Gendō and Fuyutsuki Kōzō (Nakajima, Kariya, and Miyazaki 2004, 178). The same goes for the start values of the ‘desires’ of the npcs, some of which vary (37).

122 This is a stark contrast to the anime, of which Japanese science fiction writer and feminist critic Kotani Mari (1997, 28-29) argues that the characters carefully play or enact a paternalistic family in what she calls a “family game.” In the free turn, the videogame employs central elements of dating simulation games. The free turn (more or less) abandons gender-boundaries, leaving only some difference between same-gender and cross-gender opposites in the factor that influences the npcs behaviour (Nakajima, Kariya, and Miyazaki 2004, 43). When compared to the anime, the game also serves as a parody, replacing the seemingly inescapable psychological struggle and tensions between the characters with a set of numerical values at mercy of the player.
In her analysis of Yumeno Kyūsaku’s novel *Dogura magura* from 1935, Miri Nakamura (2002, 369, 377) argues that, in problematizing the question whether human beings can be reduced to “statistical beings,” Yumeno confronts the reader with a “mechanical uncanny,” or, “a mode of fear that stems from the mechanization of the human body.” The existence of such beings “threatens what we perceive to be ‘natural,’ including personal memories and personal identities as a whole. The idea of a coherent self comes under attack, as bodies become both divisible and mechanical, and as characters are duplicated and become reduced to statistical beings.”

A similar mechanical uncanny is at work in *Eva2*. Where Adam Roberts identifies the uncanny of the replicants in *Blade Runner* as a result of the combination of machine-like strength and ruthlessness and childlike innocence, the uncanny in *Eva2* may be said to result from the combination of numerical variables and emotional, affective interactions. What is more, playing *Eva2* for a while, the player learns to predict some of the tendencies in these interactions and develops a ‘feel’ for the situation and the most promising course of action. Guidebooks and websites provide hints or ‘recipes’ that are likely to lead to an increase of the A.T. or other expected outcomes, like the one I have translated in Figure 20.

![Figure 20. Dating tactics in Eva2. Source: suba (2005a, my translation).](image)

This tension is not new in science fiction and can hardly be regarded as radical in the context of videogames, which necessarily reduce any kind of complexity to numerical, functional and winnable scenarios. However, the uncanny experience in *Eva2* is amplified beyond literary or filmic practice, because the game makes it accessible to a playful exploration during which the player experiences his or her own gradual shift towards numerical and functional emotions. Furthermore, as
opposed to most videogames, *Eva2* is particularly alienating because it defies our expectations about the numerical as a realm that can be mastered and controlled by the player. Complexity creates a kind of alien character neither fully compatible with human emotions, nor numerically transparent enough to be intelligible.\(^{123}\) Although some guiding principles for the interaction can be established, precise predictions of the outcome is impossible in most cases. This unpredictability is elevated by the third, arguably most radical novum of the game, namely the npc A.I., which I examine in the next section.

### 7.5 Unreasonable Intelligence

According to the game’s creator AlfaSystem (2003), the A.I. “Karera\(\text{u3}\)” that controls the npcs in *Eva2* is the rebuilt and enhanced successor to the AI system “Karera\(\text{u2}\),” which was used in their earlier game *Gunparade March*. AlfaSystem describes the game system as an attempt to facilitate a non-contradictory depiction of the game world and to leave most of the responsiveness to flexible algorithms rather than to determine it by a pre-scripted scenario. In addition to the features already familiar from Karera\(\text{u2}\), the new system is aimed to allow for “natural depiction (representation) of behaviour” [shizen na kōdōyōshōnanōryoku] by focusing on “flow” [nagare] rather than on “momentary depiction (representation)” [ishun no byōsha]. Kare\(\text{ru3}\) allows the npcs to move through the game world independently and pursue their own respective interests and interactions with other characters.

The *Complete Guide* (Nakajima, Kariya, and Miyazaki 2004, 34-45) reveals that the npc A.I. is a complex system in which determining the course of action is influenced by a three layered memory (short, middle, long term) and a total of 16 different desires based on this memory or on bodily needs. These factors are in turn influenced by the npcs’ other variable values (condition, mood, A.T., momentary feeling, evaluation of other characters), but also by time and place. With more information about the internal algorithms of the A.I., it might be possible to determine its logic and explain the npc actions in the game.\(^{124}\) However,

\(^{123}\) It would be a worthy sub-project to examine the normative and moral underpinnings that serve as the basis for the calculation and change of the characters numerical values in games like *Eva2*.

\(^{124}\) Such information is, however, not available. Even the *Complete Guide* speaks mostly of possibilities and tendencies when referring to the npc interactions and their effects on each party.
in the context of this chapter, I am more interested in the disruptive experience the encounter with autonomous npcs creates.

This effect of the A.I. can mainly be traced to the ways in which it deviates from our expectation towards human-like, or, in the terms of the developers, natural behaviour. **Example 7.6** shows that the npcs are strangely unintelligible in their actions and interactions, often appearing repetitive, aimless and counterintuitive. Whether it is nightly visits to the (sleeping) player character's home without purpose, or the frequent instances of sitting down only to get up again repeatedly or entering a room and leaving it again immediately—the npcs seem unimpressed with day and night rhythms, with their own A.T. values, or with the enemy threat in general. Frequently, the player character's existence is plainly ignored, even if he or she is the only one present in a given space.

These traits of the npc A.I. contribute to a profoundly uncanny, alienating scenery, in which the protagonist is at times degraded to an observing background actor or even treated as an obstacle in the environment. Rather than offering human-like, 'natural' behaviour, Kareru3 confronts the player with something that at least approaches the alien. As complex, non-transparent numerical beings in human appearance, the npcs are subject to the player's experiments, calculations and playful engagements in a similar way in which Penny (2013, 152) describes his robotic art *Petit Mal: an Autonomous Robotic Artwork*:

The primary goal of *Petit Mal* was to build a behaving machine that while entirely non-anthropomorphic and nonzoomorphic, elicits play behavior among people. Interaction is driven by curiosity and seemingly, a desire to pretend that the thing is more clever than it is. People willingly and quickly adjust their behavior and pacing to extract as much action from the device as possible, motivated entirely by pleasure and curiosity. (Interestingly, the only demographic who were unwilling to interact were adolescents). I saw the device, technically, as a demonstration of the viability of a reactive robotics strategy.

A similar playful approach characterizes the interaction with the npcs in *Eva*.

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125 This playfulness is also described in player guides. Beyond the ‘conventional’ approaches to the freedom of the game world suggested in the *Complete Guide* (Nakajima, Kariya, and Miyazaki 2004, 164-179), which include raising or lowering the A.T. as far as possible, enjoying school life, or aiming for a romantic relationship with a senior staff member of NERV, such gameplay includes “not to talk to anybody/only to talk to PenPen” (a penguin Katsuragi Misato keeps as a pet) “create a harem,” “homosexual pairing,” “how many people can I assassinate,” “refuse to work when playing Misato,” “move in with Rei as Shinji,” etc.
Yet, at the same time the uncanny of the non-transparent numerical processes, which escape calculated dominance and are sometimes the basis for behaviour beyond reason, turn the npcs into a radical alien almost comparable to the Borg—in my opinion, the disinterested, seemingly aimless and un-emphatic movement of the npcs remind of the scenes on Borg spaceships and might even prompt a somewhat similar emotional response.

In an already alien computopic universe that, regardless of its freedom, demands for some, at least temporary intentionality of the player even in the most playful engagement, the experienced lack of any consistency or intention on the part of the npcs has a powerful, alienating effect. Surprisingly, *Eva2* highlights this in a similar way as *Rez*. In the scenario “Another World,” Tokyo-3 is a utopic enclave. Neither NERV nor the angels exist, and the free turn lasts for as long as we choose, focusing on protagonist Shinji’s home and the school all children attend. Here, the uncanny social interaction with the alien is the only occupation, and while the state of trance might not be reached, the player is likewise invited to become part of its alien sociality.

### 7.6 Conclusions

In this chapter, I have analysed the disruptive potential the aesthetic experience of Otherness in the computopic offers its players in the literal shape of the alien. A rough overview of the discourse on aliens in science fiction studies helped to identify several important problems related to the notion of radical Otherness and the alien, and resulted in a general understanding of the alien as a plausible but experientially disruptive life. Against the background of several subjective indicators for such life, like the impossibility of representation, knowability, and imagination, I have identified some ways in which the computopic space might host the alien. Based on this, I have analysed several videogames for disruptive, aesthetic conflicts.

Such conflicts were shown to emerge majorly in two interrelated ways, namely the contrast between the player and the alien in action and ability, and the contradiction between regular gameplay and its abandonment, or between judgment (analysis)

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(suba 2005a, my translation).

126 The complete guide recommends to use this scenario for experimenting with how to increase the A.T. most effectively (Nakajima, Kariya, and Miyazaki 2004, 143).
and enjoyment (sensual experience). In *EDF*, the alien ants were not only uncanny in their appearance and indifference, but also in tension with the player’s lack of choice in the game. In *Rez*, the tension between synaesthetic experience and analytic play reached its climax in the Trance Mission, which lured the player into abandoning the game and its purpose altogether. In *Eva2*, the tension between numerical, calculated play and emotional content on the one side, and the uncanny, alienating disinterestedness of the unintelligible npcs in contrast to the intentional behaviour of the player on the other, was identified as the source of disruption.

An immediate question might be whether some of these disruptions are caused by a weakness in the software or are a result of intentional design, and if this has an impact on the player’s evaluation of the experience. After all, my alienation in the above-mentioned games could simply stem from faulty design—at least the designer’s claims about “natural behaviour” in *Eva2*, compared to the alienating results, may suggest such objection. Yet, I wonder if this argument does not imply that our judgment of an aesthetic experience depends entirely on our expectations. Such conclusion would suggest that we are incapable of experiencing novelty, because we can only judge our experience based on pre-defined categories. The examples above, on the contrary, show that aesthetic conflicts arise from a tension between the known and the radically Other in the experience itself, in moments where our expectations are disappointed.

To be sure, *Rez* and *Eva2* also show that alienation runs the risk of being boring. Yet, within the game world, maybe it is this boredom that prompts us to imagine and invent new tasks, and to act accordingly. What is more, the question whether a certain design is intended in the way in which it is experienced is hard to determine and I would even argue irrelevant for the immediate player experience. This does not mean that one cannot distinguish between good and bad game design. It rather means that, at times when what is perceived as ‘good’ game design seems to tend towards realism, aesthetic disruption may have to be found elsewhere. I hope to have contributed to such search. The question of intentionality remains important in a reversed sense. The analysis shows that some of the alienating effects in *EDF* and *Eva2* result from the unimagined quality of the computopic space and its complexity and contingency. This suggests that the more difficult problem might be if the alien and its disruptive effects can be produced with full intentionality at all.

On a more abstract level, the analysis suggests that some of the most alienating
experiences are afforded by the tension or conflict between intentional gaming and playfulness. Playing with the basic aesthetic tension between analytic and sensual engagement, Rez offered a synaesthetic synthesis by abandoning the task-structure of the game overall. In “Another World,” the player of Eva2 doesn’t find much to do. In these cases, the player could experience a kind of self-alienation specific to play. As already mentioned, Gadamer (2004, 107) argues that human play always requires a task it can be directed towards. In both examples, the player cannot make sense of the aimless npcs—unless he or she stops playing humanly all together, abandons the game goal, and becomes one of them. I doubt that this brings us closer to the computopic inhabitants. However, it achieves a kind of aesthetic autonomy that frees us from our common experiences and affords aesthetic novelty.

In this sense, both games prove Rancière’s (2008, 43) claim that autonomous aesthetic experience can be the beginning of a new humanity, of a new individual and collective form of life. This is not surprising, given that Rancière develops his understanding of aesthetic autonomy by discussing Schiller’s concept of “free play,” which he regards as a suspension of common experience (40-42). However, the extent to which videogames like Eva2 and Rez approximate ideal play is as intriguing as the way in which they do so. Both games offer aesthetic novelty or free play in their abandonment of the conventional, goal-directed game. Yet, they never abandon the link to human play completely. Their free play experience is only meaningful in the context of the overarching task structure of the games, which turns even these spaces into potential training grounds. At this risk, however, they not only present us with a space of radical Otherness but—almost in reversal of Jameson’s fear expressed in the initial quote—equip us with the skills to experience it and let us enter. In this space, the hand-eye coordination crucial in Rez is solely deployed synaesthetically, and the social skills in Eva2 are not directed towards anything but interaction.

Both in this extreme playfulness, and in the unintelligibility of the alien, these games add something to our aesthetic experience and arguably have an effect on what Rancière calls aesthetic distribution of the sensible. Rez, EDF, and Eva2 may not invent a new colour or a new kind of perception, to concur with Jameson. Given recent developments towards biometric passports and databasified administration, Eva2’s relatively concrete sense of alternative community based on numerical quantification of all humanly characteristics and interactions rather appears as a radicalization and potential critique of the status quo rather than a potential
alternative to it. However, at the same time, all three games generate novel and decisively disruptive experiences of radical Otherness. In their tension between the known and the alien, they point to a new terrain of aesthetic experience and thus a potential redistribution of the sensible.

Jameson (2007) concludes his initial inquiry of science fictional aliens with a question: “What […] if the alien body were little more than a distorted expression of Utopian possibilities? If its otherness were unknowable because it signified a radical otherness latent in human history and human praxis, rather than the not-I of a physical nature?” In both abstract and immediate conflicts, the analysed games shift our attention towards such latent utopian possibilities by expanding our sense of what is perceived and experienced as common, what can be said and done. In this sense they are aesthetic interventions in the political sphere, capable of stimulating our radical political imagination of alternatives. By confronting us with uncanny, unintelligible Others, which require a different mode of perception, communication, and judgment, the computopic space points to novel concepts of community and ‘social’ interaction, stimulating our imagination, and posing the question how a different sociality or community could look and feel.