Glitched perception: On the transparency and visibility of the video game medium

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Introduction

The possibility of glitch occurrence is an essential part of the video game medium. As much as it might be irritating and unwanted, it is still an important element that contributes to uniqueness of video games. Even if glitches are not restricted only to this medium and can manifest in other digital creations, their disruptive nature, combined with interactivity and immersive/narrative potential of the video game medium, not only results in production of new meanings, but it also actively influences player's behaviour. Therefore, they should not be avoided in critical thinking about digital games. Rosa Menkman (2011), relying on Paul Virilio's works about significant role of accident in human culture, argues that glitch "shows a system in a state of entropy and so aids towards an understanding of the ultimate functioning of a system"(32). In her traversing, she focuses on glitch art as the right path to acquire knowledge about digital media. However, I believe that it is equally important to explore this subject by analysing the glitch phenomenon outside the boundary of of the formal understanding of Art. Therefore, this article will focus on video game glitches; not functional ones, however, but those, which stay in relation to practices of a common player. More precisely – it will focus on how glitches change player's perception of video game medium and on his or her attempts of understanding and explaining glitch appearance, which, in the end, lead to embracing this phenomenon.

Glitch is rather ephemeral in its nature. It's sudden appearance can be very brief, but it also can be permanent. When we look at the general, technological definition, it presents glitch as connected with the procedural flow disturbances and results in minor and major system dysfunctions. While some are recognized, recorded in a typical bug report and fixed, others become forgotten or/and dormant for as long as they turn into an object of the discursive practices (Menkman 2011:26-27). The vagueness of the glitch definition causes a lot of problems and results in misuses of this term, especially in popular discourse (Švelch 2015). This mechanism is especially visible in the gaming culture, where glitches can be interpreted as "audio-visual imperfections (graphics drawing incorrectly or audio breaking up), gameplay anomalies (the ability to get stuck in certain looping sequences), or even narrative inconsistencies (continuity errors either within titles or across series)" (Newman 2005:63).

Interesting examples that illustrate this kind of misuse could be often found in glitch compilation videos posted on YouTube. While a lot of glitches that follow the official definition can be found in these productions, there are also some exceptions. For example, a few videos that bracket together glitches that can be perceived as "weird" or "scary" include the depictions of Doctor Watson from *Sherlock Holmes Versus Arsène Lupin* (2007), released also as *Sherlock Holmes: Nemesis*. In this instalment of the Adventures of Sherlock Holmes series, developers did not animate Doctor Watson walking from spot to spot. His character

seems to appear right behind player's back (game is viewed from a first person perspective) every time camera loses sight of him. It can be perceived as erratic behaviour, but it is clearly a design flaw, not a system failure or a glitch. One can argue that this kind of misuse distorts the true meaning of a glitch and causes chaos in academic nomenclature. However, the interpretations of glitch that can be found in popular discourse put this technological concept in broader critical perspective. Such perspective allows for analysing glitches not as a bugs but rather as phenomena that carry the key to better understanding video game medium. As Rosa Menkman wrote: "failure is a phenomenon to overcome, while a glitch is incorporated further into technological or interpretive processes" (2011:27).

Relation between the player and the video game medium

Before starting to analyse the glitch phenomenon, we should establish the basic, predefined game situation. All of video games are designed to be engaging experiences. It does not matter if creators follow the logic of immediacy and makes games that "erase or to render automatic the act of representation" or the logic of hypermediacy that "acknowledges multiple acts of representation and makes them visible" (Bolter&Grusin 1999: 34). They all want to achieve one goal, which is creating the best medium that would result in the strongest player's involvement with the game world and, therefore, the sense of liveness. It could be accomplished on multiple levels of both design and player's contact with the video game medium itself (Calleja 2011). However, there is one matter that should be emphasized: all of these examples are about the experience that is mediated by the technology. They are all about player's contact with the game environment through the video game medium (both software and hardware).

The video game world is a complex structure combining different kinds of elements, from objects with a physical representation in the environment, through the game engine, to the interface. Some of them can be further decomposed into even more basic parts, so subtle that the player, being too absorbed in gameplay, does not recognise them. However, all those elements perform an equally important role in building a successful simulation of a vivid space. It is possible because of the phenomenological character of this relation, simultaneously despite and because of its mediatized nature. The player builds her or his perception of the game reality by exploring its environment. With every step and every interaction with the in-game objects the player broadens his or her knowledge of the surrounding world (Vella 2013). Thus, by learning how to communicate with the video game environment, the player deepens his or her presence in the game's world. As a result of this process, the medium of the video game is getting more transparent, which results in the player's subjective perception of an illusion of a vivid space rather than a mediated digital environment.

A complex relation that can be observed between the player and the video game during the moment of gameplay is sometimes hard to grasp. It not only consists of many elements, both human and technological, but it also seems to be more intimate than it would appear while taking a closer look. Olli Tapio Leino (2012), using an example of flashbang grenades form *Far Cry* (2004), highlights this problem of ontological hybridity of a gameplay. He points out that we cannot separate *I* from the influence of the video game medium, and that "we need to consider subjectivity being co-shaped by both the human and the material game artefact" (Leino 2012:72). Considering in one's research both the aspects of active play and the way of

how the material game artefact influences player's experience is necessary to conduct proper gameplay analysis (Leino 2012:73). However, not only ontological hybridity of the gameplay makes the player-game relationship a difficult subject for the analysis.

Another problem is the constantly fluctuating nature of this connection and its performative character that influences both the player and the video game. While it is relatively easy to observe how the player changes a digital environment of the game, it is essential to remember that video game medium has power of agency too. The agency refers to game rules affecting player's actions, as well as to creating new meanings through such influence. At this point of traversing it does not seem hard to see that the relationship that is being created between player and video game medium is not an anthropocentric one, and therefore it is posthuman. To better explore this phenomenon I will make use of the critical thinking of Tadeusz Kantor, Polish artist and theatre director. Even if it was not his primal intention, his views over reality can be perceived as posthuman (Domańska 2008). His ideas, especially his concept of bio-object, can be used as a valuable tool for analysis of the bond that is being created between the player and the video game in the moment of gameplay.

The idea of the bio-object

The idea of the bio-object emerged from his aesthetical explorations concerning the real nature of objects, their meaning, and place in the surrounding reality. Tadeusz Kantor created the notion of the bio-object to describe the special relation between the actor and the stage object that is established during the play. The object defines moves and motives of the actor and the actor not only animates it, but in fact becomes the living part of it, "becames its living organs, linked to it as if genetically" (Kantor 2004: 397). They are both equally important in this qualitative new unity. Moreover, they are the main conduit of the play's meaning: "The substance of the performance was created by the "inner life" of the OBJECT, by its properties, destiny and imaginative scope" (Kantor 2004: 397). Without each other, they become useless in the context of play. Actor can abandon stage object, which would not be more than an empty shell at that moment, but he or she would lose purpose of being on stage. Regardless, even if they appear as one, the bond between them is not exactly stable. It is based on constant rivalry, which, in the end, is responsible for producing new meanings (Pleśniarowicz 1990).

This dualistic nature of the bio-object seems to reflect the power struggle between the player and the game that emerges in the gameplay. In this very moment, the symbolic bond between the player and the video game medium is created above the narration and, simultaneously, the space of multiple possibilities is produced. The idea of the bio-object in the video game medium can manifest in various ways. It is especially visible when player modifies (or in some cases even tames) game environment during his or her activities (player gains advantage) or when difficulty level of a game is too high to beat (game gains advantage). However, for the purpose of this article, I will focus only on the glitch phenomenon as an example of how the constant power struggle between the player and the video game medium produces meaning-generative tension. Special emphasis will be put on the manifestation of the glitch itself and how it changes player's perception of the digital medium. It also tones in with the idea of the bio-object, because also in this concept it is especially important that the fiction shows through its actions (Kantor 2004:397). For Kantor, one of the most important thing, was to focus not on a text of a play, but a materiality of a theatre medium, because only

that way the realness can be approached. In the context of video games, this can be translated as not playing in video game environment but rather with the digital medium itself. Therefore, glitches are perfect examples to analyse the idea of the bio-object.

Glitches in a philosophy of Martin Heidegger

In this moment we should answer a question about what is so special about a glitch manifestation and why it can influence player's perception of the video game medium. Glitches, as an ephemeral occurrences, cause a lot of definitional problems and can be interpreted in many different ways. Thus, the analysis of this phenomenon is not an easy task. In the first place, we need to determine the status of a glitch in relation to player and video game medium. I believe that the answer to that problem can be found in philosophy of Martin Heidegger, especially the idea of *zuhanden*. This concept, that can be translated as "ready-to-hand", describes the state of being of a thing (*Zeug*, "something-in-order-to", an equipment or a tool) when we use it automatically. Even with the simplest thing, the connection always consists of multiple different elements (Heidegger 1994: 87-92). A good example is riding a car: there is a driver with his/her abilities and senses, a car which is constructed with many smaller elements and a traffic which also has a lot of components (Olsen 2013: 113). In order to achieve this state of harmonious cooperation, an object has to retreat, disappear from our conscious thoughts. It needs to be nonintrusive in its presence to preserve that balance. Only then we can use it as a tool in everyday life. If that harmony is disturbed, the object becomes "present-at-hand". We start to be aware of its presence, because its nature has changed to intrusive. It can happen when an object is not working properly, like a shuttered mug or lost keys (Heidegger 1994: 92-96). However, as annoying as this state of being can be, it importance is crucial. Only objects that are "present-at-hand" can become subjects of our critical thinking. This is a very moment when, in case of video games, glitch suddenly appears.

When a game is used as it has been designed to, without any disturbances, it is "ready-to-hand". Such is a case when a player is really involved with a gameplay. Even if a game is a hypermediated one, the technical side of the medium experience is still transparent. Player does not think about it as long as everything works perfectly fine. S/he deepens his or her experience through the (re)mediated contact with a game environment. This situation changes in the moment of the glitch manifestation: with the suddenness of the glitch occurrence, the video game medium becomes present right before the player's eyes and in his or her conscious thoughts. The content of the game starts to be perceived as a background noise and the player can focus on the technological aspects of the game. I believe that, in this context, glitch is beyond the scope of the issues of transparency or visibility of the video game medium. Player's game experience changes from a mediated contact with the content of the video game to the contact with a medium of the video game itself.

It is in tone with Rosa Menkman critical thinking, where "[T]he glitch makes the computer itself suddenly appear conventionally deep, in contrast to the more banal, predictable surface-level behaviors of 'normal' machines and systems. In this way, glitches announce a crazy and dangerous kind of moment(um) instantiated and dictated by the machine itself" (Menkman 31). Computer, in this case a video game medium, lights itself up through the glitch manifestation. This phenomenon forces the player to think not only about the medium or content of the game, but also about how they are connected with other objects and the player

her/himself (Olsen 2013: 117-118). By defying its designed purpose, video game medium is exposing its agency. The agency that was not programmed beforehand by a designer. It is something unexpected, that one cannot be fully prepared for. It is emerging from the game technological materiality and thus I dare to call it 'pure' agency. This is also a perfect example of a video game being perceived and behaving as the Other (Leino 2012).

While the suddenness of the glitch occurrence can be interpreted as a game gaining advantage (especially in the context of the bio-object), we cannot forget about player's behaviour and strategy when he or she tries to cope with this phenomenon. His or her behaviour usually depends on the type of glitch he or she encounters in the game environment. Alongside all kinds of functional glitches (Švelch 2015) that can be used for cheating or glitching (Consalvo 2007; Meades 2015), we can also find a lot of more subtle examples that do not influence the game medium itself. One of them is connected to so called glitch-hunting. Glitch-hunting is a fine example that glitches do not have to be perceived as an obstacle while playing video games. They are even sometimes consider to be a part of game mythology or folklore (Newman 2008).

Interesting example of this kind of approach, when players' community tries to explain strange phenomena that they encounter inside the game world, is a so called "Suicidal Photographer" from Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas (2004). "Suicidal Photographer" is a randomly spawn pedestrian, that sometimes appears at Los Santos Inlet. S/he probably would not be even noticed, if it was not for his/her strange behaviour. A player meets the mysterious photographer right next to riverbank, where s/he takes a photo of the horizon and then walks straight to the water, only to drown himself/herself. On a fan made wikipedia website about Myths in GTA series we can find a possible explanation that the strange behaviour of the mentioned character is nothing more than a path glitch. Probably, in the early stage of development, the place was enriched with more architectural design like an extended plateau or little footbridge. Designers deleted that features from the previous version, but forgot about changing the walking path for the pedestrian. In technical terms, this is not a system failure but a design flaw, but in popular discourse it is perceived as a glitch.

"Suicidal Photographer" is a very specific kind of glitch. It does not interfere directly with player's style of play. Game environment and mechanics remain as they are meant to be. Player cannot use it to his or her advantage. In fact, she or he cannot do anything with this glitch, not even play with it. All that can be done is just to be a witness of a unexplained death of a random character. This moment is even more confusing when we realise that at first a player is probably not sure if it is a glitch or a legitimate game event. Therefore, he or she is looking for an answer or rather a solution to this particular riddle. In this way, the whole mythology around the game is being created. And by creating the whole mythology around this "glitch", players try to take away the agency from the game and make it theirs. I believe that this kind of behaviour can be interpreted as a defence mechanism against the uncanny feeling that accompany the manifestation of the video game medium presence. In this case, tension that is being created between the player and the video game medium results in new interpretations that were neither planted nor expected by designers. This meaningful situation was created because of the interaction of human and non-human actors. Without breaking the illusion of the immediate experience of the video game world, all of these senses would stay dormant.

Conclusion

"Suicidal Photographer" and creepy Doctor Watson glitches show that the players rather tend to blame a video game for all of the unexplained and strange encounters inside the game environment. It is a case even when a glitch is not exactly a glitch. In the context of the bio-object, this behaviour is a perfect example of the rivalry between human and non-human actors that results in creating new meanings. First off, there is a tension created by a manifestation of the materiality of a game artefact. Illusion of fiction is broken and player loses an immersive connection with the game world. Because of this display of agency, the video game gains advantage over the player. In the case of these two aforementioned examples, the only thing that a common player can do is to become imaginative and tame video game with his of hers creations, like compilation videos, funny mash-ups, or simply a new interpretation of the given situation. This kind of behaviour is also an example that bond between a player and a video game can be transitioned outside the digital medium.

Moreover, I believe that glitch is beyond the scope of the issues of a transparency or visibility of the video game medium. Connection between a player and the video game medium transform from undisturbed to disturbed but in the same time remain unbroken. What is really broken is just the fiction of the game world (or rather a story world), mostly because the medium has become visible at last. Glitches make that more obvious than other phenomena and design mechanisms, such as ludonarrative dissonance or emersion (Kubiński 2016). By making video game medium visible, glitches make it also more powerful. The content of the game becomes transparent and its position shifts from being a purpose to being a context for an interpretation of a new behaviour of a game. In the very moment of glitch occurrence, the goal of the play changes. Player is no longer playing within the boundaries of the video game medium, but with the game artefact itself. The manifestation of the glitch forces him or her to understand the medium better and that whole experience is founded on immediacy of an unmediated contact.

Games

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