Glitched perception: On the transparency and visibility of the video game medium [1]

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Abstract

The video game is a complex structure combining different kinds of elements, from objects with a physical representation in the virtual 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 an engaging digital reality. This can easily be observed in video games with three-dimensional expanded environments, carefully crafted to reinforce and enrich the player's involvement in the game world (Calleja 2011). This involvement is possible because of the phenomenological character of the relation between the player and the game, simultaneously despite and because of its mediatized nature. The player builds her perception of the game reality by exploring its environment. With every step and every interaction with in-game objects, the player broadens her knowledge of the surrounding world (Vella 2013). Thus, by learning how to communicate with the video game environment, the player deepens her presence in the game's world. As a result of this process, the medium of the video game becomes more transparent, which results in the player's subjective perception of an illusion of unmediated digital space (Bolter & Grusin 1999).

However, this situation is not a stable one, and a lot of different factors can disturb this kind of connection between the player and the game's world. One of these factors, which will be the main subject of this presentation, is a glitch. When a glitch occurs, the player becomes very much aware of the presence of the medium. The illusion is broken and the game is no longer "ready-to-hand" (Heideggerian idea of *zuhanden*) (Heidegger 2008). The intrusive nature of a glitch is a reminder that the video game is a resistant object that no one can truly master. Moreover, the error in the system highlights how (re)mediatized the game experience really is (Menkman 2011). For a moment, the video game medium loses its transparency and reminds the player about its original nature.

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The analysis will focus on how the moment of the glitch, as a manifestation of the pure agency of the video game, influences not only the relation between the player and the game but also the player's perception of the video game object. What is especially interesting from this perspective is how the non-anthropocentric nature of this relation is revealed in the moment of the glitch. Due to this phenomenon, the game gains an advantage over the player, who is forced to change her perception of the game environment. As a result of a glitch, dormant affordances resurface from the video game environment. Even if they have not been designed by the developers, they still produce new content that the player may give meaning to. This process will be illustrated by a case analysis of specific glitches that break the illusion of a life-like digital world but at the same time do not significantly influence the main game system or any of its mechanics. Among the analysed cases, there will be such well-documented examples of glitches as Manimals (*Red Dead Redemption*), The Suicidal Photographer (*Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*), MissingNo. (*Pokémon Red* and *Blue*) and others that are related to the animated or human-like in-game objects.

Games
GRAND THEFT AUTO: SAN ANDREAS. Rockstar North, PC, 2004.
POKÉMON RED AND BLUE. Game Freak, Game Boy, 1996.
RED DEAD REDEMPTION. Rockstar San Diego, PlayStation 3, 2010.

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