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## Glitched perception: beyond the transparency and visibility of the video game object

### Abstract

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 recognize them. However, all these elements perform an equally important role in building a successful simulation of a vivid reality. This can easily be observed in video games with three-dimensional expanded environments that are carefully crafted to reinforce and enrich the player's immersive experience of the game world. It is possible because of the phenomenological character of this relation, simultaneously despite and because of its mediatized nature. The player builds her perception of a game's reality by exploring its environment (Vella, 2013). With every step and every interaction with the in-game objects, the player broadens her knowledge of the surrounding world. 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 object is becoming more transparent, which results in the player's subjective perception of an illusion of a vivid world rather than just a mediated digital space.

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 paper, is glitches. When a glitch occurs, the player becomes very much aware of the presence of the object. The illusion is broken, and the game is no longer "ready-to-hand" (the Heideggerian idea of *zuhanden*). 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. For a moment, the video game object loses its transparency and reminds the player about its digital nature.

The analysis will focus on how the moment of 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 by the moment of a 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 concur to break the illusion of a life-like digital world but at the same time do not significantly influence the main game systems, such as the mechanics. Among the analysed cases, there will be such examples 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.

**Key words:** video games, glitch, game object, Heidegger, bio-object

## Introduction

The possibility that, at any time while playing, a glitch might occur, 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 the 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 the interactivity and narrative potential of the video game medium, not only results in the production of new meanings, but also actively influences player behaviour. As Rosa Menkman, relying on Paul Virilio's works about the significant role of accident in human culture, argues, a glitch "shows a system in a state of entropy and so aids towards an understanding of the ultimate functioning of a system".<sup>1</sup> In her analysis—as seems to be a popular approach in media studies<sup>2</sup>—she focuses on glitch art and aesthetics as the right path for acquiring knowledge about digital media. I agree that it is important to explore this subject further by analysing the glitch phenomenon not only as a possible work

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<sup>1</sup> Rosa Menkman, *The glitch moment(um)*, (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures) (2011), p. 32.

<sup>2</sup> See also: Peter Krapp, *Noise Channels: Glitch and Error in Digital Culture*, (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press) (2011); Kim Cascone, "The Aesthetics of Failure: 'Post-Digital' Tendencies in Contemporary Computer Music", *Computer Music Journal* 24:1 (2000); *Gli.t/ch 20111 Reader [ROR]*, ed. Nick Briz, Evan Meaney, Rosa Menkman, William Robertson, Jon Satrom, Jessica Westbrook, (Amstardam/Chocago: Unsorted Books) (2011).

of art, but also as something that can happen to the user of technology on an everyday basis. Only this way will we be able to understand better the technology itself and its influence on our life. Therefore, this article will focus on video game glitches; not functional ones that are used to exploit the game mechanisms, however, but those that relate to practices of a common player and are more visual in nature.

Glitches are a well-discussed subject in the field of game studies; however, the majority of this work focuses on how a glitch is used by players and on how it exists in the community consciousness: Mia Consalvo<sup>3</sup> and Alan F. Meades<sup>4</sup> write about how glitches are used in counterplay, Thomas Apperley<sup>5</sup> analyses glitches in games in the context of aesthetics and digital art, Jaroslav Švelch<sup>6</sup> focuses on glitch-related humour, whereas Jan Švelch<sup>7</sup> analyses the exploitation of glitches with regards to microtransactions. In this paper, instead, I will explore this subject mainly from the perspective of the ontology of the video game object. I believe that by analysing glitches in this way, we will be able to deepen our knowledge about the nature of the player–game relationship from the perspective of the non-human agency of the digital object.

To better explore this subject from this angle, I will base my argument on the Heideggerian idea of “presence-at-hand” and explain how the manifestation of the glitch emphasises the objectivity of the digital game artefact. This will lead me to the central problem of the paper: what happens in the moment of the glitch, and what are the consequences of the erratic behaviour of the game software? More precisely, the paper will focus on how glitches change the player’s perception of the video game object, and on her attempts at understanding and explaining glitches, which, in the end, lead to the embracing of this phenomenon and its incorporation into the lore of the community. This process is based not only on communication within the gaming community, but also between the player and the game itself. The game actively influences our gameplay experience and can or should be perceived as our partner in play. In this context, the glitch seems to be the manifestation of the game’s agency, and, hence, the game’s assertion of itself as an agent over and against the

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<sup>3</sup> Mia Consalvo, *Cheating. Gaining advantage in videogames*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT) (2007); James Newman, *Playing Videogames*, (New York: Routledge) (2008).

<sup>4</sup> Alan F. Meades, *Understanding counterplay in video games*, (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group) (2015).

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Apperley, „Glitch sorting: Minecraft, curation and the post-digital”, in *Postdigital Aesthetics. Art, Computation and Design*, ed. David M. Berry, Michael Dieter (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan) (2015).

<sup>6</sup> Jaroslav Švelch, “Comedy of Contingency: Making Physical Humour in Video Game Spaces”, *International Journal of Communication* 8:23 (2014).

<sup>7</sup> Jan Švelch, “Negotiating the Glitch. Identifying and Using Glitches in Video Games with Microtransactions”, in: *New Perspectives in Games Studies: Proceedings of the Central and Eastern European Game Studies Conference Brno 2014*, ed. Tomáš Bártek, Jan Miškov, Jaroslav Švelch (Brno: Masaryk University) (2015).

player. Therefore, to deepen the analysis of this phenomenon, I will use the concept of the bio-object created by Tadeusz Kantor, which will allow me to approach this subject from a posthuman perspective, that is close to Latourian critical thinking. This way, I will be able to show how the sudden appearance of a glitch can resolve itself in the creation of new meanings, with the game object as equal to human co-creator of senses.

## Definitional problems with glitch

A glitch is rather ephemeral in its nature. Its sudden appearance can be very brief, but it can also be permanent. When we look at the general, technological definition, a glitch is presented as being related to procedural flow disturbances, and as resulting 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 so long that they turn into an object of discursive practices<sup>8</sup>. The vagueness of the definition of ‘glitch’ causes a lot of problems and results in the misuse of this term, especially in popular discourse<sup>9</sup>. This mechanism is especially visible in 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)”<sup>10</sup>. This definitional vagueness creates a very interesting tension whereby a glitch would be a behaviour of a game object that does not fit the player's (or even the designer's) expectations. It does not have to be connected to a system malfunction, but, rather, is something that could be perceived as a misbehaviour of the game – even if the game just follows the lines of code that the designer wrote.

Interesting examples that illustrate this kind of misuse could be often found in glitch compilation videos posted on YouTube<sup>11</sup>. While a lot of glitches that follow the technological definition can be found in these productions, there are also some

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<sup>8</sup> Rosa Menkman, pp. 26-27.

<sup>9</sup> Jan Švelch, “Negotiating the Glitch. Identifying and Using Glitches in Video Games with Microtransactions”, in: *New Perspectives in Games Studies: Proceedings of the Central and Eastern European Game Studies Conference Brno 2014*, ed. Tomáš Bártek, Jan Miškov, Jaroslav Švelch (Brno: Masaryk University) (2015), pp. 55-59.

<sup>10</sup> James Newman, “Playing (with) Videogames”, *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 11:1 (2005), p. 63.

<sup>11</sup> For example: Top 15 SCARIEST Video Game Glitches, <https://youtu.be/q5m0WVhYMX4>, date accessed 25 February 2018; 10 Insane Glitches that Actually Made Video Games Better, <https://youtu.be/D8bCcTjcGP0>, date accessed 25 February 2018; Another Top 10 Video Game Glitches, <https://youtu.be/sotqQFRUeHE>, date accessed 25 February 2018;

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, Frogwares), released also as *Sherlock Holmes: Nemesis*. In this instalment of the *Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* series, the developers did not animate Doctor Watson walking from spot to spot. His character seems to appear right behind the player’s back (the game is viewed from a first-person perspective) every time the camera loses sight of him. This can be perceived as erratic behaviour on the part of the software, but it is clearly a design flaw, not a system failure or a glitch. One can argue that this kind of terminological misuse distorts the true meaning of the concept 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 a broader critical perspective. Such a perspective allows for an analysis of glitches not as bugs, but, rather, as phenomena that carry the key to better understanding the video game medium. As Menkman wrote: “failure is a phenomenon to overcome, while a glitch is incorporated further into technological or interpretive processes”<sup>12</sup>. Therefore, in this article, I follow the popular understanding of a glitch, because I believe it will cast a new light on how players interpret the game object’s agency as a disturbing error that should be explained afresh and rationalised in the gaming community.

## Glitches and the philosophy of Martin Heidegger

In this moment, we should answer the question of what is so special about glitches and why they can influence the player’s perception of the video game object. In the first place, we need to determine the status of a glitch in relation to the player and the video game object. I believe the answer to that problem can be developed in relation to the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, especially the ideas of *zuhanden* and *vorhanden*. The former 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<sup>13</sup>. A good example is riding a car: there is a driver with her abilities and senses, a car which is constructed with many smaller elements, and the situation of traffic, which also has a lot of components<sup>14</sup>. In order to achieve a state of harmonious cooperation, an object has to retreat and disappear

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<sup>12</sup> Rosa Menkman, p. 27.

<sup>13</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Bycie i czas* [Being and Time], (Warszawa: Wydaw. Naukowe PWN) (2008), pp. 87-92.

<sup>14</sup> Bjørnar Olsen, *W obronie rzeczy: Archeologia i ontologia przedmiotów* [In Defense of Things. Archeology and the Ontology of Objects], (Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich PAN Wydawnictwo) (2013), p. 113.

from our conscious thoughts. It needs to be nonintrusive in its presence to preserve that balance. Only then can we use it as a tool in everyday life. If that harmony is disturbed, the object becomes *vorhanden*, “present-at-hand”. We start to be aware of its presence, because its being has changed to an intrusive one. This can happen when an object is not working properly, like a shattered mug or lost keys<sup>15</sup>. However, as annoying as this state of being can be, its importance is crucial. Only objects that are “present-at-hand” can become objects of our critical thinking. This is the very moment when, in the case of video games, the glitch suddenly appears.

When a game is used as expected, without any disturbances, it is “ready-to-hand”. Such is the case when a player is fully involved with the gameplay. As Gordon Calleja points out, the player’s involvement with the game is the result of the player’s contact with the video game medium itself across multiple dimensions: starting from a kinaesthetic sensation of moving inside a new environment, through to the sharing of the experience of play with other players or to thinking about new strategies of play, among others<sup>16</sup>. While the player is thus involved in the process of play, the game object disappears from her conscious awareness, becoming “ready-to-hand”. Even if a game is a hypermediated one (such as, for example, *Her Story* [2015, Sam Barlow])<sup>17</sup>, the technical side of the medium experience is still transparent. The player does not think about the complex technology behind the game software as long as everything works perfectly fine and she is familiar with her gaming device. She deepens 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 object becomes present right before the player’s eyes and in her conscious thoughts. The content of the game (gameworld, mechanics, aesthetic etc.) starts to be perceived as background noise and the player can focus on the technological aspects of the game. I believe that, in this context, the glitch is beyond the scope of the issue of the transparency or visibility of the video game medium. It is also different from what Piotr Kubiński understands as an “emersive effect”<sup>18</sup>, because it is not simply a shift from being immersed in the game world to being “emersed” out of it, even if the glitch phenomenon exposes the fact that our contact with a video game is only the impression of a direct encounter<sup>19</sup>. I believe it is something more, something different. The sudden appearance of a glitch makes the player’s game experience

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<sup>15</sup> Martin Heidegger, pp. 92-96.

<sup>16</sup> See: Gordon Calleja, *In-game: From immersion to incorporation*, (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.) (2011)

<sup>17</sup> Jay David Bolter & Richard Grusin, pp. 31-50.

<sup>18</sup> Piotr Kubiński, „Immersion vs. Emersive Effects in Videogames”, in *Play, Theory, and Practice: Engaging with Videogames*, ed. Dawn Stobbart and Monica Evans (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2014), pp.133-141.

<sup>19</sup> Piotr Kubiński, *Gry wideo: Zarys poetyki*, (Kraków: Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych "Universitas") (2016), pp. 78-79.

change from mediated contact with the content of the video game to contact with an object of the video game itself.

## Materiality of the video game object

While it is relatively easy to observe how the player can exert her agency to change the state of the game, it is essential to remember that the video game object also has the power of agency, in a way that is different from any other category of games. It can actively defy us not only by presenting us with a hard-to-beat difficulty level, but also by exhibiting unexpected, erratic behaviour – like a glitch. Therefore, to truly understand the glitch phenomenon, we should think about the digital game more as an artefact that evaluates performance,<sup>20</sup> or, in other words, as a playable artefact<sup>21</sup>.

As Olli Tapio Leino<sup>22</sup> argues, the true distinction between video games and traditional games is hidden in the approach to the materiality of the game and its process. When we look closer at board games, such as *Monopoly*, the player has to internalize the rules in order to play the game – she has to agree to follow them. Without that process, the material side of the game object is just cardboard and a few pawns that are deprived of their intended functionality. However, in video games, this situation looks different: “aspects of computer games exist in complete disregard of the player’s thoughts, motivations and intentions”<sup>23</sup>. The materiality is closely braided with the process. It does not matter if the player wants to act differently towards a non-player character (NPC) than is programmed – she just cannot. Moreover, her actions in the game are not only limited by the behaviour of the game software, but even imposed by it. With this realization, the game can be perceived as a complex object that is filled with agency.

At this point in the traversing of this argument, it does not seem hard to see that the relationship that is being defined between the player and the video game object is not an anthropocentric one, but is more posthuman in its nature. The human being, in this case the player, is not in the centre of the creation, in this case the gameplay. She is one of the elements that create game experience and not the only one with agency. In this context, the glitch seems not only to point to the objectivity of the

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<sup>20</sup> Veli-Matti Karhulahti, “Defining the Videogame”, *Games Studies: international journal of computer game research* 15:2 (2015), <http://gamestudies.org/1502/articles/karhulahti>, date accessed 3 September 2017.

<sup>21</sup> Olli Tapio Leino, “Death Loop as a Feature”, *Game Studies: the international journal of computer game research* 12:2 (2012b), [http://gamestudies.org/1202/articles/death\\_loop\\_as\\_a\\_feature](http://gamestudies.org/1202/articles/death_loop_as_a_feature), date accessed 3 September 2017.

<sup>22</sup> Olli Tapio Leino (2012b).

<sup>23</sup> Olli Tapio Leino (2012b).

video game artefact – thus re-establishing the visibility of the technological nature of the game – but also emphasizes its agency to the point where we start perceiving the game as the Other that we have to face.

To better explore this phenomenon, I will make use of the critical thinking of Tadeusz Kantor, the Polish artist and theatre director. Even if it was not his primary intention to articulate such a theory, his views about the role of objects in reality can be perceived as non-anthropocentric and close to Bruno Latour's ones<sup>24</sup>. His ideas, especially his concept of the bio-object<sup>25</sup>, can be used as a valuable tool for the analysis of the bond that is created between the player and the video game in the moment of gameplay, because they show how the agency of a physical object, in this case the glitch phenomenon, influences the meaning creation process.

## The idea of the bio-object

The idea of the bio-object emerged from Kantor's aesthetical explorations concerning the nature of objects, their meaning, and their place in the surrounding reality. Kantor coined the notion of the bio-object to describe the special relation between the actor and the stage object that is established during the performance of the play. The object defines the moves and motives of the actor and they are both 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"<sup>26</sup>. However, the actor not only animates the object, but in fact becomes a living part of it, "becomes its living organs, linked to it as if genetically"<sup>27</sup>. Actor and object are both equal in this qualitative new unity. Moreover, without each other, they become useless in the context of the performance. The actor can abandon the stage object, which would then be no more than an empty shell at that moment, but, at the same time, she would also lose the purpose of her being on stage.

Regardless, even if they appear as one, the bond between actor and object is not exactly stable. It is based on constant rivalry: either the actor dominates the object and uses it as she wishes, or the object exposes its agency over the human and confines her movements. One can, often easily, manipulate the mannequin, but the clumsy and ragged material properties of a puppet can also make us trip over the

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<sup>24</sup> Ewa Domańska, „Humanistyka nie-antropocentryczna a studia nad rzeczami”, *Kultura Współczesna* 3 (2008), pp. 19-21.

<sup>25</sup> Tadeusz Kantor, *Teatr śmierci: Teksty z lat, 1975-1984*, (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich) (2004).

<sup>26</sup> Tadeusz Kantor, p. 397.

<sup>27</sup> Tadeusz Kantor, p. 397.



lifeless limbs. However, this inner struggle is not the unwanted outcome of this connection – it is essentially responsible for producing new meanings<sup>28</sup>.

This dualistic nature of the bio-object seems to reflect the power struggle between the player and the game that emerges in gameplay. In this very moment, the bond between the player and the video game object is created, and, simultaneously, a space of multiple possibilities is produced. The idea of the bio-object in the video game medium can manifest in various ways, although the ephemerality of the gameplay phenomenon often makes it hard to discern in visible forms. It is especially visible through all the traces that the player leaves inside the game environment, like looted crates or bloodstains after a battle. These are evidence of symbiotic cooperation between the game object and the player. However, the rivalry side of this relationship is revealed in simple gameplay action as well; for example, when the player gains an advantage by modifying (or in some cases even taming) the game environment during her activities (by choosing the narrative path or changing the primary state of the game object by playing with mods). By comparison, the game object gains an advantage when the difficulty level of a game is too high to beat, or even every time the player realizes she has been playing ‘wrong’ and is forced to change her behaviour in order to progress. Of course, another example of this mechanism are glitches, which are something unplanned and unexpected that can interfere with the player’s involvement with a game because of its suddenness. They not only interrupt her game session, but more often than not, force the player to change her strategy of play (for example, when a glitch makes it impossible to finish a quest the way she wants by blocking certain choices).

This is in tone with Menkman’s critical thinking, where “[T]he glitch makes the computer itself suddenly appear conventionally deep, in contrast to the more banal, predictable surface-level behaviours 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”<sup>29</sup>. The computer, in this case the video game object, lights itself up through the glitch manifestation. This phenomenon forces the player to think not only about the object or content of the game, but also about how it relates to other objects and the player herself<sup>30</sup>. By defying its designed purpose, the video game object is exposing its agency, the agency that was not intentionally programmed beforehand by a designer. It is something unexpected that does not fit the player’s perception of what the game object *should* do. It emerges from the game’s technological materiality; thus, I dare to call it ‘pure’ agency, because it was not primarily imposed by a human. This is also a perfect example of a video game being

<sup>28</sup> Krzysztof Pleśniarowicz, *Teatr Śmierci Tadeusza Kantora*, (Chotomów: Verba) (1990), p. 35.

<sup>29</sup> Rosa Menkman, p. 31.

<sup>30</sup> Bjørnar Olsen, pp. 117-118.

perceived and behaving as the Other<sup>31</sup>. The glitch occurrence reminds us that playing a video game is an act of communication<sup>32</sup>, being one of the video game's responses to the player's actions.

In some radical cases, this response can result in the shutdown of the game. The power is taken from the player and she is forced to regain her own position by learning more about and eventually overcoming the technology behind the game. In other, less extreme cases, the video game object demonstrates its agency by, as has already been discussed, breaking the illusion of a coherent gameworld. Even if a graphical glitch, for example, does not usually stop the game, it is still very disruptive to the player's experience. When such a glitch appears, the player is knocked out from the flow of playing and can only stare in wonder, as in the case of a glitch in *Red Dead Redemption* (2010, Rockstar San Diego) referred to as "Manimals" by the player community, in which the game misplaces some of the textures, causing animals to look like humans and making it possible for the player to find human-animal hybrids during exploration of the wilderness. The glitch is now patched, but traces of it still linger in the memories of the community of players and are incorporated into the fandom's consciousness. Even if the "Manimals" glitch did not really influence the flow of the gameplay process, it still made the player pause to consider the game's technological materiality.

For Kantor, one of the most important things was to focus on the materiality of the theatre medium because its realness can only be approached in this way. For this reason, he always incorporated a very special kind of object into his plays – abandoned, garbage-like, stripped of the functionality that was imposed on them by a human<sup>33</sup>. They were just "poor objects". However, this transition draws them closer to the reality of the lowest rank, which shows the object as it is – with no strings attached. From then on, the poor object is autonomous and can, for example, become a work of art<sup>34</sup>, being perceived in itself and for its own sake rather than disappearing in view of its function. By using abandoned and garbage-like items, Kantor opened a door to reality where art and life do not transcend each other, but rather render one another<sup>35</sup>. This is possible because poor objects have lost their original functionality, and therefore "the familiarized object that is tamed by the

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<sup>31</sup> Olli Tapio Leino, "Untangling Gameplay: An Account of Experience, Activity and Materiality Within Computer Game Play", in *The Philosophy of Computer Games*, ed. John Richard Sageng, Hallvard Fossheim and Tarjei Mandt Larsen (Dordrecht: Springer) (2012a), pp. 71-72.

<sup>32</sup> Tomasz Z. Majkowski, „Różnojęzyczność gier wideo a sytuacja gracza : rozpoznanie wstępne [Video Game Heteroglossia and Player Situation: Initial Diagnosis]”, *Wielogłos. Pismo Wydziału Polonistyki Uj* 25:3 (20015), pp. 23–39.

<sup>33</sup> Tadeusz Kantor, pp. 413-424.

<sup>34</sup> Ewa Domańska, p. 20.

<sup>35</sup> Mischa Twitchin, *The Theatre of Death - The Uncanny in Mimesis: Tadeusz Kantor, Aby Warburg, and an Iconology of the Actor*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK) (2016), p. 29.

utility of the life suddenly uncovers its independent, alien existence”<sup>36</sup>. The “poor objects” stop being transparent and become visible. Even when they were later an element of a bigger installation and, in the end, a non-human part of a bio-object, they never went back into the shadow. Their worn-out materiality emphasised their presence and agency on stage. As a result, the spectator was always in a state of being awake from the illusion<sup>37</sup>.

In the context of video games, this approach seems to describe the moment of the glitch. The player is suddenly awakened from her involvement with the gameplay process and has to face the materiality of the game object that loses (even if only for a moment) its designed function. As a result of this, the player is no longer playing inside the video game environment, but rather with the digital object itself.

This approach is directly related to a posthuman perspective on agency. Kantor’s critical thought emphasized the specific status of the object<sup>38</sup>, which is not defined by its given, human functionality, but also has the capacity to itself define – and, as a result, transform – human beings when they are using it. This is similar to the situation in a relational network, as Latour<sup>39</sup> theorizes it. Actants operating inside such networks are constantly in the process of being translated. In other words, when actants are connected to each other inside this network, they influence and change each other. The difference between this and the bio-object, is that, for Kantor, the bond between actor and object on stage is aesthetic in nature. Likewise, while the player and the game are still functioning inside a bigger relational network because of the designed character of the game artefact and the specificity of the play action, the connection between them has different properties. Moreover, the aforementioned power struggle inside the bio-object produces new aesthetic meanings.

While this idea is somewhat similar to what Peter-Paul Verbeek calls cyborg intentionality<sup>40</sup> – it is a new entity that is being co-shaped by a human being and a technological artefact of a game<sup>41</sup> – there are some distinctions. First of all, the bio-object is not a phenomenological relation that changes the player’s perception of the world. Here, two independent, equal actants – human and non-human – create the new entity, but remain separate inside it (hence, the power struggle between them). The human being does not transcend her human condition and the poor object does

<sup>36</sup> Tadeusz Kantor, p. 461,

<sup>37</sup> Małgorzata Koch-Burzyn, „Sobowtóry, manekiny i bio-obiektywy w twórczości Tadeusza Kantora”, *Kwartalnik Teatralny* 1 (2002).p. 102.

<sup>38</sup> Ewa Domańska, pp. 19-21.

<sup>39</sup> Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the social: An introduction to actor-network-theory*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press) (2005).

<sup>40</sup> Peter-Paul Verbeek, “Cyborg intentionality: Rethinking the phenomenology of human-technology relations”, *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 7:3 (2008), pp. 387–395.

<sup>41</sup> Olli Tapio Leino (2012a), pp. 71-72.

not stop being poor (in the Kantorian sense). Only in this way can a fruitful, meaning-generative tension be produced. New meanings are the effects of the mediation process between the player and the game object – both the partner in play and the platform – for this dialogue to happen. In this context, the glitch is the manifestation of the game’s agency, and the player has to answer to it to regain the dominant position in this relation – even if it lasted only a moment until the game “wins” again. Therefore, while the suddenness of the glitch occurrence can be interpreted as a game gaining an advantage (especially in the context of the bio-object), we cannot forget about the player’s behaviour and strategy when she tries to cope with this phenomenon. Therefore, even if this text aims its attention squarely upon the game object, it is crucial to see how players react to glitches in order to regain a dominant position inside the bio-object. For this reason, I want to briefly explore this subject further in the last section of this paper.

## Glitches in collective consciousness

A player’s reaction to glitches usually depends on the type of glitch she encounters in the game environment. In addition to glitches like “Manimals”, which do not alter the gameplay experience on anything other than an audio-visual level, there are also so-called functional glitches<sup>42</sup>. They not only actively influence the game mechanics but could also be used by players to change the gameplay experience<sup>43</sup>. In some cases, they are exploited by players that want to gain an additional advantage in a game, like speedrunners, cheats or trolls<sup>44</sup>.

However, glitching is a more complicated phenomenon in the gaming community than simply the exploitation of a design flaw. In his research, Alan F. Meades emphasises the fact that searching for a glitch is, in fact, a manifestation of a deep understanding of a game’s structure, and even can be perceived as an act of devotion or love to the given production<sup>45</sup>. This kind of 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 considered to be a part of game mythology or folklore<sup>46</sup>, like “MISSINGNO”. from *Pokémon Red and Blue* (Game Freak, 1996) or “Minus World” in *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo, 1985)<sup>47</sup>. However, these are both older games that

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<sup>42</sup> Jan Švelch, p. 57.

<sup>43</sup> Jan Švelch, p. 57.

<sup>44</sup> See: Mia Consalvo (2007).

<sup>45</sup> Alan F. Meades pp. 75-113.

<sup>46</sup> James Newman (2008), pp. 113-120.

<sup>47</sup> You can find more information about those glitches here: Pokémon's Famous Missingno Glitch, Explained, <http://kotaku.com/pokemons-famous-missingno-glitch-explained-165392914>, date

can no longer be officially patched, meaning that these glitches have naturally become a permanent part of them and of gaming culture in general.

Interestingly enough, in newer productions – at a time when games can be easily fixed even after release – some developers actively decide to keep some glitches in the game code as a part of the gameplay experience. In *Minecraft* (2011, Mojang) – one of the most popular games of recent years – we can find a hostile creature (or a hostile mob/mobile) known as the “Creeper”<sup>48</sup>. The creeper started out as a simple glitch, when one of the creators made a mistake in entering the dimensions of a pig mob into the game environment. Its deformed and disturbing looks were inspiring enough to be introduced to the game as a new, “creepy” creature<sup>49</sup>. This case is interesting for at least two reasons. As Apperley notes, only some glitches are tolerated enough to be aestheticized by the gaming community<sup>50</sup>. This aestheticization process leads to a mechanism of taming the manifestation of the game object agency (as a glitch occurrence clearly is) by granting it new meaning and functionality. The Creeper is an example of how a glitch can be translated from an erratic software behaviour to a feature. If we translate it to the context of a bio-object, it becomes an example of one of the ways in which the player can regain power over the game object after the glitch occurrence.

Another interesting example of this kind of approach – when the player community tries to explain strange phenomena that they encounter inside the game world – is the so-called “Suicidal Photographer” from *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (2004, Rockstar North). “Suicidal Photographer” is a randomly spawned pedestrian that sometimes appears at Los Santos Inlet. S/he would probably would not even be noticed if it was not for his/her strange behaviour. The player meets the mysterious photographer right next to a riverbank where s/he takes a photo of the horizon and then walks straight to the water and drowns. On a fan-made Wiki<sup>51</sup> dealing with myths in the *Grand Theft Auto* series, we can find a possible explanation for the aforementioned character’s strange behaviour: namely, that it is nothing more than a path glitch. Probably, in the early stage of development, the place was enriched with more architectural elements, such as an extended plateau or a little footbridge. The game’s designers might have deleted these features in the transition to a newer version but forgot about changing the walking path for the pedestrian. In technical

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accessed 3 September 2017; Minus World, [https://www.mariowiki.com/Minus\\_World](https://www.mariowiki.com/Minus_World), date accessed 3 September 2017.

<sup>48</sup> Creeper, <https://minecraft.gamepedia.com/Creeper>, date accessed 3 September 2017.

<sup>49</sup> Thomas Apperley, „Glitch sorting: Minecraft, curation and the post-digital”, in *Postdigital Aesthetics. Art, Computation and Design*, ed. David M. Berry, Michael Dieter (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan) (2015), p. 235

<sup>50</sup> Thomas Apperley, p. 236.

<sup>51</sup> Suicidal Photographers, [http://gta-myths.wikia.com/wiki/Suicidal\\_Phographers](http://gta-myths.wikia.com/wiki/Suicidal_Phographers), date accessed 19 October 2016.

terms, this is not a system failure but a design flaw, but, in popular discourse, it is perceived as a glitch.

The “Suicidal Photographer” is a very specific kind of glitch. It does not interfere directly with a player’s style of play. The game environment and mechanics remain as they are meant to be. The player cannot use it to her advantage. In fact, she cannot do anything with this glitch, not even play with it. All that can be done is just to be a witness to the unexplained death of a random character. This moment is even more confusing when we realise that, at first, the player is probably not sure if it is a glitch or a legitimate game event, especially because of the sandbox character of the game. Therefore, 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. By creating the whole mythology around this “glitch”, players try to take away the agency from the game and replace it with theirs. I believe that this kind of behaviour can be interpreted as a defence mechanism against the uncanny feeling that accompanies the manifestation of the video game object’s presence. In this case, the tension that is created between the player and the video game object 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 meanings would remain dormant.

## Conclusion

Glitches in video games, especially when we consider the popular understanding of them, usually describe phenomena that are related to unexplained and strange encounters inside the game environment. The players rather tend to blame a video game for all things that do not work within the designed logic of a game. This is the case even when a glitch is not exactly a glitch, but a design flaw, as in the examples of the “Suicidal Photographer” from *GTA: San Andreas* and Doctor Watson’s teleportation in *Sherlock Holmes Versus Arsène Lupin*. All the visible signs of the game’s agency are interpreted as an error, a system failure: in other words, as something out of order, and, therefore, wrong. In the context of the bio-object, this behaviour is a good example of the rivalry between human and non-human actors, because, with the glitch occurrence, the game object reminds the player that she is not playing alone.

First off, there is the tension created by a manifestation of the materiality of the game object. Because of this display of agency, the video game gains an advantage over the player. In the case of the aforementioned examples, the only thing that a typical player can do is to become imaginative and tame the video game with her creations,

like compilation videos, funny mash-ups, or simply a new interpretation of the given situation. This kind of behaviour is also an example of the fact that the bond between a player and a video game can transition to outside the digital medium. However, in the case of more functional glitches, the player can actively use these manifestations of the game's agency to either beat the game or play against the logic of its design, which would result in an overpowering of the game object.

Therefore, I believe that the question of the glitch is beyond the scope of the issues of the transparency or visibility of the video game medium. The connection between the player and the video game object transforms from an undisturbed to a disturbed one but, at the same time, remains unbroken. To use the Heideggerian nomenclature, it has to become "present-at-hand" to break away from being transparent, "ready-to-hand". By making the video game object visible, glitches also make it more powerful. The content of the game becomes transparent and its position shifts from being a purpose to being a context for the interpretation of a new behaviour of a game object. In the very moment of the glitch's occurrence, the goal of play changes. It not only forces the player to think about the digital materiality of the artefact and the technology behind it, but essentially invites her to play with it. With her acceptance of this invitation, the player is no longer playing within the boundaries of the video game environment, but with the game artefact itself.

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