Glitches as Fictional (Mis)Communication

Nele Van de Mosselaer
University of Antwerp
Rodestraat 14
2000 Antwerp, Belgium
nele.vandemosselaer@uantwerpen.be

Nathan Wildman
Tilburg University
Warandelaan 2
5037 AB Tilburg, The Netherlands
n.w.wildman@uvt.nl

ABSTRACT

Videogames revolutionized the way in which we can experience fictional worlds. They allow us to identify with whichever character we control, interact with fictional environments, and decide the course of fictional narratives through our own actions in fictional worlds. However, the representation of these complex interactive fictional worlds in videogames very often suffers from technical malfunctions or so-called glitches, which can thoroughly shape the fictional experience of the player. From the perspective of the philosophy of fiction, glitches can be seen as distortions of the intentional communication between fiction-makers (the game's developers) and fiction-consumers (players), some of which are a miscommunication of what is fictional, while others communicate new, unanticipated fictional content. In this paper, we examine the relationship between glitches and fictionality. More specifically, we distinguish and analyze three glitch-types, based on the player's experience of the malfunction in question, detail the fictional relevance of these types, and discuss possible strategies for dealing with the fictional inconsistencies caused by glitches.

A first type of glitches, mechanism glitches, such as texture glitches in *Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios 2011) and ragdoll glitches in *Fallout 4* (Bethesda Game Studios 2015), are the most frequently encountered kind of glitch. These are comparable to technical malfunctions in other fictional media, like printing errors in novels, in that they are both unintentional and disrupt or even halt the player's engagement with the fictional world. Such glitches introduce fictional inconsistencies by miscommunicating or distorting a game's fictional content.

In contrast, pseudo glitches, like the 'restart' scene in *Batman: Arkham Asylum* (Rocksteady Studios 2009), in which players are made to think that their game crashes upon meeting the villain Scarecrow, are disruptions of the virtual world deliberately created by developers, often to highlight or play with the fact that the fiction involves a digital medium. These glitches are only perceived as a miscommunication by the user of the system. In reality, they are a case of deliberate communication about the media-fiction relationship, and are revealed to be such when the player plays on. In this way, pseudo glitches are quite similar to metafictional elements in more traditional fictional media such as novels, in that they are part of the fiction themselves, but make the fiction incoherent by revealing and emphasizing its fictionality and mediatized nature.

Finally, there are also generative glitches. These glitches do not distort the communication of fictional content like mechanism glitches do, but are rather taken to

communicate novel fictional content altogether. The game *Red Dead Redemption* (Rockstar San Diego 2010), for example, presented the player with 3D-models of human beings which, due to an error, acted like animals, creating an entire new species of human-animal hybrids called "manimals" by the player community (Janik 2017, 74). This new content is produced in a way unanticipated by the developer. From the perspective of philosophy of fiction, generative glitches are the most interesting kind of glitch, as they introduce the contradictory phenomenon of *unintentional fiction*. Philosophers of fiction tend to define fiction as something that was created with the intention of prescribing imaginings (Stock 2016, 205-206). When encountering a generative glitch, however, something is made fictional without an author-driven mandate to imagine it. The misbehaving computer system itself starts to serve as a kind of unintended "author", communicating new, unforeseen, content to players.

Confrontations with each of these glitch-types present a challenge to the player who needs to reconstruct what is fictional in a videogame. There are, however, multiple strategies available to the player who approaches the videogame as a fictional work and wants to imagine the fictional world of the game as a coherent environment. Based on our comparison between glitches and cases of fictional inconsistency in more traditional fictional media, such as printing errors, authorial mistakes, and metafiction in novels, we re-appropriate the strategies for dealing with fictional incoherence described by Derek Matravers in his book *Fiction and Narrative* (2014) to deal with the challenges presented by glitches. Interesting about these strategies is that players often already use them to deal with inconsistencies that are specific to the videogame-experience. After all, videogames, consisting of both rules and fiction, typically represent incoherent fictional worlds, in which for example death, by rule (but not by fiction), is not permanent (Juul 2011, 130).

The first strategy is the *rejection strategy* (Matravers 2014, 132), in which the fiction consumer takes the report of fictional events to be a lie, mistake, or hallucination of one of the in-game characters, narrators, or even players. Players already often apply this strategy when dying and respawning in games, by rejecting that the death of their character, the representation of which they caused by mistake, is a part of the fictional game narrative. They can also use this strategy to deal with pseudo-glitches like the one in *Batman: Arkham Asylum*, by interpreting the whole restart-scene as a mere hallucination of a drugged Batman, the character through which the story is focalized.

The second strategy is the *reconciliation strategy* (Matravers 2014, 132-133), in which the fiction consumer thinks hard to find a way to make the narrative or fictional world coherent despite the presence of a glaring inconsistency. Players might, for example, explain the bullet-sponge abilities of their human character by reasoning that they are wearing superb bulletproof vests underneath their clothes. The reconciliation strategy can also be used to deal with certain movement glitches, when a player, for example, justifies the erratic movements of a certain character by reasoning the character went mad.

The third strategy is the *weird world strategy* (Matravers 2014, 133), in which the fiction consumer imagines the game events take place in a world where something that is seemingly impossible or inconsistent is actually perfectly possible. Players can apply this strategy to explain their character's awesome capabilities of putting large objects in small backpacks, and might use it to explain the presence of manimals by pretending that *Red Dead Redemption* takes place in a version of America in which human-animal hybrid species exist.

Lastly, there is the *disregarding strategy* (Matravers 2014, 133-134), in which the fiction consumer simply puts aside part of the fiction as a flaw and makes sense of the

fictional world without it. Players already frequently use this strategy when ignoring the presence of floating health bars in the fictional world, but can also use it to disregard the presence of certain mechanism (texture or ragdoll) glitches or even outright ignore the manimals.

Keywords
Glitches, Fiction, Make-Believe, Communication, Miscommunication, Authorial intention, Inchorence

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