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Pending System Change: Recontextualizing Transgender Glitch Art as Disability Aesthetic

Changement systémique en attente : recontextualiser l'art transgenre du glitch comme esthétique du handicap

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Abstract

This article critically examines the powerful and subversive yet broken glitch. Within hegemonic and normative structures, the glitch as a failure to function works to refuse to perform, disrupt, slow or break systemic norms within artistic representation. Artworks such as *Digital TV Dinner* (1978) have carved out a place for transgender artists and scholars to thoroughly analyze systemic understandings of gender in order to perform “calculated failures.” Through creating an imagined alternative to the norm, trans glitch art and scholarship decontextualize, detach and displace disability, despite clear disability aesthetics. In *Disability Aesthetics*, Tobin Siebers (2010) notes that disability as an aesthetic in modern art challenges normative representations of the body. Yet, when disability is merely an aesthetic or a metaphor, the lived experiences of disabled people are distanced. Drawing on Siebers’ notion of disability aesthetics, this article seeks to recontextualize disability by examining the trans analysis of glitch art, wherein disability aesthetics are present through vandalism and seeing beauty in the broken, the use of the language of function in glitches and the connection of trans glitch art to Donna Haraway’s cyborg. To fully use glitches as a critical and oppositional tool to challenge normative notions of how the body functions, disability must be recontextualized. For now, systematic change is pending.

Résumé

Cet article propose une analyse critique du *glitch*, à la fois puissant, subversif et brisé. Dans les structures hégémoniques et normatives, le glitch, en tant que dysfonctionnement, agit comme un refus de fonctionner, une perturbation, un ralentissement ou une rupture des normes systémiques dans la représentation artistique. Des œuvres comme *Digital TV Dinner* (1978) ont permis aux artistes et chercheuses ou chercheurs transgenres d’examiner en profondeur les constructions systémiques du genre et de mettre en scène des « échecs calculés ». En créant une alternative imaginaire à la norme, l’art du *glitch* trans et les travaux qui en découlent tendent à décontextualiser, détacher et déplacer le handicap, bien que des éléments esthétiques liés au handicap

soient clairement présents. Dans *Disability Aesthetics*, Tobin Siebers (2010) souligne que le handicap, en tant qu'esthétique dans l'art moderne, remet en question les représentations normatives du corps. Toutefois, lorsque le handicap n'est qu'une esthétique ou une métaphore, les expériences vécues des personnes handicapées sont mises à distance. En s'appuyant sur la notion d'esthétique du handicap développée par Siebers, cet article cherche à recontextualiser le handicap à travers l'analyse trans de l'art du *glitch*, où cette esthétique se manifeste par le vandalisme, la valorisation du brisé, l'usage du langage fonctionnel propre au *glitch* et le lien avec le cyborg de Donna Haraway. Pour que le *glitch* puisse pleinement servir d'outil critique et opposé aux conceptions normatives du fonctionnement corporel, le handicap doit être recontextualisé. Pour l'instant, le changement systémique reste en suspens.

Keywords

Disability; Glitch; Neurodivergence; Digital Art; Transgender

Mots-clés

Handicap; *glitch*; neurodivergence; art numérique; transgenre

Playing Loren Schmidt's video game *Strawberry Cubes* (2015) can be hard to describe.

Created for a game jam, the game uses a limited colour scheme of red, black and white, an 8-bit pixel art feel with simplistic controls to give the game nostalgia, the game seemingly has no clear goal. Accompanied by minimal but unnerving music, Schmidt uses glitches to create a disorienting and unstable environment, one wherein the player explores but is never quite sure where they are positioned, or even the rules of the game: the backgrounds are glitching, constantly moving and changing; the rooms are filled with plates, frogs, seeds and flowers; and the typical "WASD" keyboard controls are thrown into question by random onscreen prompts that direct the player. Schmidt's use of the glitch was originally inspired by disability; they created the game with their grandmother in mind, who had Alzheimer's disease (Rougeau 2015). Yet, the connection between disability and glitches is largely ignored in favour of transgender readings of the game. While it is important to acknowledge Schmidt's transness, analysis and scholarship on *Strawberry Cubes* highlight the glitch as a creative aesthetic that attempts to visualize a subversive alternative, but one that often ignores disability.

A glitch can be defined as a failure to function and has become a theoretical lens through which art is discussed and created. A glitch can manifest in a multiplicity of ways: a sudden crash of a website, lag or freezing while playing a game, or damage to an audio file that causes it to skip. In art these elements are purposeful. Michael Betancourt (2017b) notes that the glitch in art is created using many methods, from manipulating the digital file to cause it to malfunction, to the presentation of digital art itself. Amanda K. Greene (2024) sees glitchiness as an anachronistic lens that utilizes "not just as a technical error, or even

a particular artistic artifact but rather an orientation toward human media interactions that makes the connective tissue, and the contingency of those connections, visible” (5-6).

Transgender artists and scholars have embraced the glitch as a theoretical and artistic orientation. In recent writings on glitch art and games through a transgender lens, the notion of action is an overarching theme across glitch art creation and theory: non-performance of an expected function; a purposeful misuse of a machine; a stoppage or slowing of activity; or a (seeming) lack of control. Legacy Russell (2020) refers to a glitch’s purposeful failure to function as a calculated failure, or a refusal to perform an assumed function within a systemic and binary way of thinking. Similarly, Whit Pow (2021) argues that glitches can represent a moment of undoing. This is expanded on by Ari Gass (2024), who posits that glitches can act as an aesthetic abstraction that challenges normative ways of being. In other words, the glitch might seem like a malfunction of an expected performance but is intentional and acts to challenge normative and assimilative systems.

Glitches easily orient and locate disability, recontextualizing glitches according to Tobin Siebers (2010) notion of disability aesthetic, which critically analyzes and highlights the presence and influence of disability in traditional artistic representations. Disability aesthetics challenge, extend and (re)define beauty and humanity conventions present in glitchy orientations and glitch art. Yet, as Siebers (2010) warns, when disability is represented as aesthetic, in image or language, it acts as a barrier against the lived experiences of disabled people and is merely aesthetic content, which is the case with the glitch as an aesthetic orientation. The aesthetic decontextualization of the lived experiences of the disabled body is essential in understanding how the systematic changes

glitch art seeks to challenge is pending. Glitch art draws from cyborg feminism, fitting into a theoretical lineage that positions technology as a tool for blurring binary categories of human and machine, material and construct, highlighting the fragility of systematically constructed normative gender binaries. This is a lineage wherein disability has been used as a metaphor in the creation and interpretation of the intersections of art and technology, detached and decontextualized from the experiences of disabled individuals to create narratives through language and aesthetics associated with disability. Alison Kafer (2013), in her critique of Donna Haraway's cyborg, highlights the misuse of disability in discussions of technology and the body:

Disability may be an excellent site for witnessing the blurring of human and technology, but not, apparently, for exploring actual experience of such blurring [...] Disability and disabled people are decontextualized, removed from the realm of the political and presumed to play no active role in the category breakdowns that animate both the cyborg and the manifesto. (115)

Much like the cyborg, glitch art creation and scholarship use the aesthetics and language of disability, but lack understanding toward experiences, causing disability to serve merely as a metaphor, separate from disabled experiences.

Through a trans lens, the concept of glitches is seen as an optimistic and oppositional tool that provides a creative, accessible and powerful imagining of an alternative, but this is an alternative that lacks meaningful acknowledgement of disabled experiences. For example, while Russell's (2020) engaging glitch feminist manifesto positions glitch as a form of resistance at the intersections of gender and race, she uses

the language of disability to describe gender performances, referring to Sin Wai Kin's performance art as using "gender prosthesis" (56). Additionally, Gass discusses Loren Schmidt's *Strawberry Cubes* through a trans lens, ignoring any reference to Alzheimer's disease besides a footnote. While I do not think that every discussion on glitches should or needs to include disability, however, this becomes troubling when clear connections between disability and glitches are largely ignored or recontextualized to fill a different meaning.

Utilizing disability aesthetics as a theoretical lens, this paper theorizes transgender interpretations of glitch art are informed by disability aesthetics in the interpretation of and description of the artworks, finding meaning and artistic merit in broken and malfunctioned technology. Artists and scholars use the intersections of transness and glitches as a powerful tool for creative and optimistic imaginings of the world that acknowledge the complexities of difference and performative norms, yet, as is the case with many artworks using disability aesthetics, the subversiveness of glitches is limited in the continuing aesthetic decontextualization and neglect of disabled bodies, experiences and voices. This paper begins by using the trans reading of *Digital TV Dinner* (1978) as a theoretical foundation, establishing a connection between how the artwork is an example of glitches as disability aesthetics via destruction and vandalism as creating new art. This foundation establishes that disability aesthetics is key to understanding trans glitch art and scholarship. Next, by continuing to think about *Digital TV Dinner* and disability, I examine the use of the word function in glitch scholarship, which has significant meaning and implications for autistic people. Then returning to Loren Schmidt's glitch game *Strawberry*

Cubes, I will highlight how even when disability is consciously used as inspiration, game scholarship erasures or sidesteps Schmidt's conceptual inspiration derived from their grandmother's Alzheimer's disease. Finally, I examine the metaphorical use of prosthesis in Legacy Russell's analysis of Sin Wai Kin artworks, recalling Donna Haraway's concept of the cyborg, which has been identified as a significant text within transgender studies, yet heavily critiqued in critical disability studies.

This paper is part of what should be a continuing effort to consider and reflect on the representations of disability and disability aesthetics. Glitches can present a new way of visualizing spaces that looks past binaries and deconstructs the spaces that are not made with differences in mind, seeing a subversive beauty in the action of breaking systematic expectations of assimilative perfection. By decontextualizing disability, or specifically the experiences of people with Alzheimer's, autistic individuals and amputees, the subversive impact of glitches is limited. To break the systematic barriers glitches aim to destroy, disability needs to be recontextualized.

Digital TV Dinner and Glitch as Disability Aesthetic

Simply put, glitch art is a form of disability aesthetics. In *Disability Aesthetics*, Siebers (2010) notes that disability aesthetics refuses to recognize a universal and normative able body as the sole determination of aesthetics, and disability aesthetics embraces the beauty in what often is perceived as broken while also challenging presuppositions one

might have about art. Glitch as disability aesthetic is particularly apparent in the case of *Digital TV Dinner* through Siebers notion of vandalism as an active form of creation and transformation connected to disability aesthetics in modern art. *Digital TV Dinner* presents an alternative to a normative or “healthy” function of a gaming console, the Bally Astrocade, as a way it can provide entertainment and connect to audiences. While a trans reading has taken centre stage in the interpretation of *Digital TV Dinner*, co-creator Jamie Faye Fenton is a trans woman, the notion of beauty and meaning in what might be otherwise understood as broken is unmistakably heightened by a disabled reading of the artwork. *Digital TV Dinner* is an important artwork, and it represents the methodological complexities between glitch art, transgender interpretations and disability aesthetics. Before addressing disability aesthetics and trans interpretations of glitch art, I want to briefly discuss why glitches have such a thematic and emotional connection to transgender individuals. Glitch artwork reflects the aesthetics of the internet and digital spaces, which have been monumental in forming contemporary trans identities, representations and communities. Susan Stryker (2017) asserts that with the rise of the internet, digital spaces and images, the stability of assumed binary gender categories was questioned by the notion of “self,” which did not need to translate neatly onto a biological body. The glitch artworks and interpretations analyzed in this paper by Sin Wai Kin, Loren Schmidt and Jamie Faye Fenton, who are all trans, represent or are described through different types of glitch art and interpretations: *Digital TV Dinner* represents a mechanical glitch, as it was made by disrupting the function of a Bally Astrocade gaming console; *Strawberry Cubes* uses the imagery and feeling of glitches to create a disorienting

atmosphere; and Sin Wai Kin's dreamlike and binary-challenging performances are analyzed by Russell through a glitch feminist lens. The artists' trans identities are important, but it is significant to examine the role that disability has played in interpreting these works.

Thematically trans interpretations of digital art highlight the importance of knowing normative systems of gender, which are then used to break these systems. *Digital TV Dinner* was created by Jamie Faye Fenton and Raul Zaritzky,¹ who took a Bally Astrocade video game console and smashed it with their fists. As Michael Betancourt (2017a) observes, this was not "simply smashing the system" but a form of "productive action" (57). As abovementioned, action is a connecting theme across much theorization of the glitch, from calculated actions to purposeful non-actions. In the case of *Digital TV Dinner*, the action of destruction was intentional and calculated: Fenton was very familiar with the Bally Astrocade system, as she had worked for the company in managing the production and design of the console and, as Whit Pow (2021) explains, "She coded what the user could do with the Astrocade, and also what the user could *not* do" (200). This knowledge of the system, then breaking it, is observable elsewhere in trans digital media analysis. Notably micha cárdenas (2022) posits that the concept of transgender is reliant on western systematic knowledge of gender, which "imagine[s] an individual subject with a discrete gender, who crosses a line to another discrete gender [...]" (33). Familiarity with systematic conceptualizations of gender, and transgender, allows one to not just "smash the system"

¹ Sound was by Dick Ainsworth.

but perform a productive action, or as cárdenas suggests (2022), acknowledge multiple imagined genders, how they are shaped and how a dominant conceptualization is prioritized. I suggest that glitch art is made with intention, not just random actions, but within the context of showcasing the fragility from which our conceptions of identity, in this case gender, have been built.

The fragility of binary gender, and our ability to smash it as trans people, presents an optimistic lens that can visualize alternatives to how systems project images of static and unchangeable gender. In their article “A Trans Historiography of Glitches and Errors,” Whit Pow (2021) thoroughly examines *Digital TV Dinner*, noting that it is an example of an artwork created through repeated analysis and thorough knowledge of the gaming system, resulting in a glimpse at alternative possibilities:

The glitch presents us with moments of fleeting possibility and promise—imagery that signals to us that there is something beyond the coded boundaries of rule sets within software systems, that there might be the possibility for something unintended, something unstable, something unimaginable whose status is never quite fixed, never quite bounded. (209)

Extending Pow’s arguments for a trans media history of glitches, Ari Gass seeks to include video games and concludes that glitches allow for envisioning a future where trans people are not in opposition to a systematic way of being: they suggest that a glitch is a “desired state” that can act as “an operation that allows creators to reflect on the kinds of difficult or negative emotions of transgender life [...]” (Gass 2024, 19). I agree that it is important to carve out space to discuss trans experiences, and I do not want to undersell the

significance of glitches as a potential tool for trans individuals to reflect on, understand and potentially deconstruct their position.

Despite many of the themes trans scholars have highlighted applying to disability, the alternative imagined through glitch art scholarship is one without consideration of the experiences of disabled people: the fragility of binaries, instability of systematic definitions of identities, and knowledge of the system intersect with disabled experiences. Digital spaces that have significance to transgender people have meaning to disabled people as well: Michael Orsini and Joyce Davidson (2013) highlight the importance of forums for autistic people to learn about autism and express themselves; Lisa Diedrich (2024) highlights how digital spaces generate opportunities which allow for disabled people to connect and participate in social as well as political life. The number of forums dedicated to trans and disabled communities is significant, in addition to the intersection of people who, like me, are both transgender and autistic.² This intersection remains prominent, despite attempts to distance transness and queerness from disability in an attempt to gain mainstream assimilation.³

The subversive and disruptive meaning of *Digital TV Dinner* takes a new form through disability aesthetics and vandalism. Siebers notes the representative power of vandalized images, which “[...] fail to represent what they represented before their injury – and yet we resist the fact. The act of vandalism changes the referential function of the artwork, creating a new image in its own right.” (2010, 83). Siebers goes on to assert that the object

² For a study in the intersections of transgender identities and autism, see Warrier et al. (2020).

³ Both Awkward-Rich (2022) and Smilges (2022) provide critical and historical analyses of the distances of transness and queerness from disability.

was created or conceived differently, as “able-bodied,” and the perceived perfection of the object has been altered, injured or destroyed, but now can represent a new object. I posit that *Digital TV Dinner*, and other glitch artworks, adopt this meaning: the deliberate destruction of the gaming console results in a new image, one which transcends the representative mould of the pre-vandalized console and allows new and perhaps less stable interpretations to emerge. Siebers states that the vandalized image cannot return to its original form because the authenticity of it as an artwork is tied to its destruction. This is reflected in the subversive action performed to generate glitch artworks like *Digital TV Dinner*, as the Bally Astrocade in its original form lacks a destructive narrative, but also destruction through the rage of the player would not have the same intended action. The artwork does not need to function as intended to have meaning to audiences, and meaning and beauty are not so easily defined.

The parallels are clear between glitch art and disability aesthetics, and when considering Siebers’ vandalism as disability aesthetic, glitch artworks like *Digital TV Dinner* present art created through a purposeful destructive action (vandalism) that seeks to transform an object to give it a new meaning. Glitch art as disability aesthetic is an important intersection to consider and would help reach glitch's subversive potential.

Glitches, Autism and the Language of Function

Digital TV Dinner and other glitch artworks connect to disability aesthetics through vandalism, which is framed around and described with the language of function. The language of function stands out as the perception of function is central to critical autism

studies, with Stuart Murray (2013) stating the importance of questioning how representations of autism are using the concept of function in order to know how it is being deployed in certain contexts. Through disability aesthetics and critical autism studies frameworks, it is then critical to consider how glitch artists and scholars are deploying the concept of function. While the intent might be looking beyond the concept of normative (gender) functions and envisioning an alternative future, it is being done in a way that continues to sidestep, erase, decontextualize and/or depoliticize disabled, in this case autistic, experiences. Using the definition of a glitch as a failure to function, glitches can connect to criticisms of the language of autistic categorization. Greene (2024) sees the glitch as an orientation, a lens to (anachronistically) examine art and consider the possibilities that arise from the intersections of technology and human bodies. Rather than viewing glitches as failures and malfunctions, the glitch provides creative possibilities and interpretations, distancing technology and the human body from normative notions of temporal expectations and function and resyncing time to more flexible temporal rhythms.

The language of function is used when attempting to define autism as a stable and legible category. As Stuart Murray (2010) notes, the notion of function has been central to discussions on autism from the early foundational texts from the 1940s to the now outdated yet still used language of “high” and “low functioning.” The term and use of the word “function” have been built into the language and representation of autism. The notion of function, or high-functioning, orders autism into hierarchies and set parameters, which provides the assumption of meaning and understanding to wider audiences (Murray 2010). Function is more often used to structure hierarchies, and how well one can perform an

assumed function is given value, which in turn orders how autistic people are valued.

Russell evokes the language of the virus to discuss temporal expectations and the value of the body, specifically stating that machines are expected to work well and quickly: “[...] when we embody the virus as a vehicle of resistance, we are putting a wrench into the mechanical gears of gender [...]” (2020, 112). Russell’s words recall Pow’s reading of *Digital TV Dinner*, specifically the artist’s technical awareness and purposeful misuse of the hardware of the Bally Astrocade. Russell further suggests that viruses can present a “slowness [that] shifts time and space, altering a person’s relationship to the machine” (2020, 111), which additionally recalls Pow’s assertion that *Digital TV Dinner* is a purposefully extended suspension of a moment (2021): the artwork undoes the expected function and suspends the moment of undoing, which is a calculated and not passing failure.

While the glitch in this context is being considered through gendered labour and resistance, if accounting for disability, or specifically autism, the notion of a virus and temporal differences reflect not resistance, but everyday life and the lack of consideration for differences in how disabled people can perform or function within specific temporal limitations. In discussing disability and time, Susan Wendell (2001) posits that often refusing to accommodate one’s different and fluid relationship with time and labour is passed off as a failure of the individual to manage their time. Additionally, Wendell suggests that pace and flexibility in temporal considerations make a difference to disabled workers, yet this accommodation is not given or understood. Russell’s glitch as a virus that slows or shifts time represents a relationship many disabled people have with “the

machine,” a relationship that is not often accommodated and does not represent “a wrench into the mechanical gears” but often is framed as an individual failure, wherein the individual is removed from the system.

Using the glitch to reconsider the cycles of function as flexible and unpredictable is a more productive way of conceptualizing glitchy labour. This is easier said than done, and artist and scholar Kara Stone posits that it can be difficult to unlearn notions of productive function: “Those of us with certain disabilities may not be able to work in ways that are expected of us, often as expected by others but sometimes also as expected by ourselves” (date, n.p.). To reflect on how to unlearn these expectations, Alison Kafer (2013) suggests that crip time is a way of recognizing limited temporal expectations and reconfiguring these expectations to accommodate a wider scope of individuals. Stone’s artwork *Ritual of the Moon* (2019) is significant through the lens of crip time, glitching expectations and functions. *Ritual of the Moon* is a game made through community collaboration, combining time-consuming fibre art with technology. While the game’s themes of loneliness, healing, forgiveness and reflection are significant, I would like to highlight Stone’s collaborative approach to the creation of the artwork. Stone describes the process of being aware of a multiplicity of differing cycles and narrow windows of synchronization, which can be difficult, but results in a productive healing process: “I deeply believe that creating art can be a healing, reparative process, something that sustains us and gives us life, rather than draining it” (Stone 2018, n.p.). Stone’s approach underscores what Ellen Samuels describes as crip time’s ability to be “beautiful and forgiving” (2017 n.p.). Samuels and

Stone conceive crip time through the lens of compassion, forgiveness, patience and flexibility, which could orient glitches toward disability in a meaningful way.

Many descriptions of glitches use the language of a violent disruption to function, whether through smashing a machine or slowing it with a virus. Yet perhaps a more productive way of conceptualizing glitches and function through the lens of autism is a reconfiguring and resyncing of expectations of labour and productivity. Ellen Samuels (2017) posits that reconfiguring expectations means listening to our bodies and their rhythms:

It requires us to break in our bodies and minds to new rhythms, new patterns of thinking and feeling and moving through the world. It forces us to take breaks, even when we don't want to, even when we want to keep going, to move ahead. It insists that we listen to our bodyminds so closely, so attentively, in a culture that tells us to divide the two and push the body away from us while also pushing it beyond its limits. Crip time means listening to the broken languages of our bodies, translating them, honoring their words (n.p.)

Translation might be difficult for some autistic individuals, especially approximately 50% of whom, like myself, have alexithymia, which is characterized by difficulty in identifying and expressing feelings. Yet the glitch becomes more meaningful when positioned not to slow down but to accommodate the breadth of differing rhythmic temporal expectations, even those who might take longer to articulate or find that rhythm.

In viewing glitch art as disability aesthetic, it is imperative to question the role of concepts of function and autism. Russell and Pow refer to glitches as suspending the assumed function and performing a calculated resistance. Simply slowing down the

function or acting as a virus might be a form of resistance that not everyone can afford to perform, especially when the difference in function is not valued or accommodated. By calling into question the value of specific types of functions, glitches evoke disability aesthetics, yet could take this framing further by considering the experiences of autistic and other disabled people. Disrupting the normative assumptions about autistic function, specifically the false conceptualization of high/low functioning individuals, glitches open a creative artistic opportunity to crip time to reflect on and resync to differing rhythms not only for autistic individuals but many different bodies.

***Strawberry Cubes* and Displacing Alzheimer's**

Disability aesthetics might not always be consciously utilized in the creation and interpretation of art, and yet there are examples of artworks that purposefully draw on the imagery and disruption of glitches. Besides *Strawberry Cubes*, another work that draws a connection between glitches and Alzheimer's disease is the short film and ad campaign "The Glitch" (2023). Alzheimer's is a neurodegenerative disease which impacts all aspects of an individual's life (Alzheimer Society of Canada 2024). The Alzheimer Forschung Initiative (AFI), alongside BBDO Dusseldorf and Caviar, created "The Glitch" in an attempt to visualize living with Alzheimer's disease through the imagery of glitches. The ad campaign sought to inform younger audiences by evoking the glitch through the Datamosh filter used on various social media apps, as well as working with AFI neurologist Michael Lorrain (BBDO n.d.). The ad frames the glitch as a malfunction, it is negative rather than

subversive as it is within many glitch artworks, which I believe recalls Murray's consideration of knowing how the notion of function is being utilized. In addition to placing Alzheimer's firmly within a medical model and playing into the "in their shoes" form of empathy,⁴ the film is a clear example of glitches being used in connection to Alzheimer's disease and disability. The connection in *Strawberry Cubes* is more elusive, less valuable as a phenomenological position compared to queer or trans readings and often ignored by scholars. The glitch as disability aesthetic has been consciously used to express disabled experiences, yet, as the case of *Strawberry Cubes* indicates, these experiences can easily be decontextualized and displaced to the footnotes.

Disability aesthetic as vandalism is important in *Strawberry Cubes*: a friend of mine thought the game was broken when she first played, with Schmidt purposefully disrupting players' expectations. *Strawberry Cubes* through an Alzheimer's lens is an important reading of the game and a powerful use of glitches in a disability context. The disorienting and inconsistent landscapes of *Strawberry Cubes* connect to the progressive stages of Alzheimer's: when the player starts the game, the glitches are not as prevalent, but the more one explores, the more time one spends in the game, the more disorienting the landscape becomes. The stages of Alzheimer's present themselves through stages of awareness, more noticeable and then move into a decline and need for care. The progression of disorientation and confusion in the gameplay, while not holding the player's

⁴ For a critical analysis of the empathy game, see Ruberg and Scully-Blaker (2021).

hand or attempting to place them “in the shoes” of an Alzheimer’s patient, evokes this sense of progression.

While this reading can be meaningful, it is often ignored. Gass notes that much of the video game scholarship of *Strawberry Cubes* focuses on a queer reading, which they believe challenges normative game principles through the game’s seemingly goalless exploration, but continues a trend in queer studies of universalizing specific perspectives. They seek to separate trans perspectives to highlight trans life and experiences, stating: “I hope to show how developers are using the glitch to think about gender and the body through computation in ways that a queer-as-antinormative frame alone might otherwise miss” (Gass 2024, 7). However, this argument is itself missing the context that was key in the creation of *Strawberry Cubes*, one which trans-as-antinormative alone fails to consider.

The connection *Strawberry Cubes* has to disability though Alzheimer’s disease is missing from Gass’s article, in most other scholarship on the game and the internet. In an endnote, Gass acknowledges the game’s Alzheimer’s connection (2024, 21): “In their Patreon updates, Schmidt describes the game as a way to memorialize her grandmother’s struggle with Alzheimer’s disease, which offers some explanation for the disorienting and inconsistent landscapes of the game.”⁵ I attempted to find more explicit references to this connection and after several dead ends, I found two sources: an article that once appeared in *Playboy*, now only available in an archived format on journalist Mike Rougeau’s (2015) website, includes a discussion on Alzheimer’s in an interview with Schmidt; and an article

⁵ I was not able to access the Patreon.

by Anastasia Wilds on *Screenrant* (2022), which references and links to another interview with this information, however, this link is broken. While I find Gass's article and interpretation of *Strawberry Cubes* through a trans incredibly valuable, the decontextualization of disability is prevalent and underscored through any reference to Alzheimer's being in a broken link, from an archived interview, behind a Patreon paywall and in an endnote. While I understand that there is not always room to have a meaningful discussion on disability, I believe that this aspect of the game was important and needs to be expressed beyond an endnote.

I find it oddly poetic that I struggled to find reference to Alzheimer's and *Strawberry Cubes*, and that an article in *Playboy* was more willing to confront disability than video games scholarship, highlighting the displacement of disability. The trans reading of the artwork is meaningful, but the displacement of Alzheimer's highlights how disabled experiences continue to be ignored in interpreting *Strawberry Cubes* and other glitch artworks.

Re/Detaching Prostheses and the Cyborg

Disability aesthetics can be purposefully drawn upon but ignored to push a different reading, as with *Strawberry Cubes*, but alternatively, disability aesthetics can be purposefully drawn upon but ignore or detach the identity of the human individual. In *Disability Theory* (2008), Tobin Siebers notes that identities allow one to imagine and insert themselves into the social world, however, disability holds little social power and is valued as a theoretical position to frame certain social constructs: "Disability identities, because

of their lack of fit, serve as critical frameworks for identifying and questioning the complicated ideologies on which social injustice and oppression depend” (Siebers 2008, 105). Donna Haraway positions disability in such a way in her famed essay “A Cyborg Manifesto” (1985). Haraway theorizes that a cyborg is a hybrid of machine and organism, one of social reality and fiction, material and imagined, with fictional and constructed aspects that reflect a universalization of experiences and assumed social roles. Disability scholars have raised questions on how disabled humans are being defined within the theorization of the cyborg, specifically that their bodies are used as a metaphor while their experiences are depoliticized or removed from the central analysis. In other words, the disabled body is used as a prop and not as an active presence in the blurring of the technological and material binary. I suggest these issues present in cyborg feminism are being replicated in the trans theorization of glitches.

The human amputee is often detached from their prosthesis in cyborg feminism and, I would argue, in glitch art analyses. Katherine Ott (2002) suggests that cyborg theorists rarely consider the amputee because, when a prosthesis is attached to a person, the prosthesis is not easily positioned for a metaphorical interpretation: “Keeping prostheses attached to people limits the kinds of claims and interpretive leaps a writer can make” (5). Claiming heightened or super abilities detaches the lived experiences of disabled people and attaches new narrative possibilities. When the cyborg narrative replaces lived experiences, much like *Strawberry Cubes*, the disabled histories are only visible in footnotes (Ott 2002). Additionally, the value of the prosthesis is in the image: it is

the imagined representation of the prosthesis and not the person and their experiences that are considered valuable within this form of disability aesthetics.

Through a glitch feminist lens that draws on cyborg feminism, Russell posits that the complexities of the cyborg are present in the works of Sin Wai Kin. Sin is a Chinese-Canadian and London-based performance artist, whose artwork incorporates elements of drag, Cantonese Theatre and speculative fiction, in addition to the works of Ursula Le Guin, Octavia Butler and Donna Haraway. Artworks such as *The Story Cycle* (2022) include dream-like narratives and voiceovers that question voices of authority and blur binary assumptions, reflecting their identity as non-binary and mixed-race. As abovementioned, Russell (2020) uses the term “gender prosthesis” to describe how Sin Wai Kin performs gender:

[...] the different selves they perform underscoring the socio-cultural production of exaggerated femininity as a gendered trope, ritual, and exercise [...] Sin dons gender as a prosthesis. An homage to an expansive history of masculine/feminine drag performance and genderfucking, Sin’s costumery is replete with breast and buttocks inserts, a sumptuous wig, makeup painted with vivid artistry and a sweeping gown that glitters. (56-58).

The performance of gender present in Sin’s artwork is exaggerated, but Russell equates the exaggerated and removable elements - the costume, wig and inserts - to a prosthesis. Prosthetics are much more complex than this metaphor implies and ignore the lived experiences of disabled people, which also ignores the normative medical model from which the prosthesis is often framed.

While the prosthesis can be an extension of the body, it can also represent normalcy and limitations. Innovations in prosthesis technology in the 19th century developed alongside shifts in notions towards normalcy, correction and control (Jones 2017). Prostheses are complex, yet a medical model of normalcy is in opposition to the metaphorical “gender prosthesis” as a glitch that Russell describes in the work of Sin Wai Kin. Prosthesis is not an exaggeration, enhancement or costume, and this misinterpretation points to a decontextualization of the purpose of a prosthesis. Moreover, Russell’s use of “gender prosthesis” recalls Haraway’s use of prostheses and disability. Haraway connects prosthetics to cyborgs, stating that “paraplegics and other severely handicapped people can (and sometimes do) have the most intense experience of complex hybridization” (2006, 113). Russell and Haraway present prostheses as cybernetic or glitched power to complicate gender, with little attention to disabled experiences.

The lack of contextualization of disability is clear through the criticism from critical disability scholars about Donna Haraway’s cyborg, her use of prostheses and the seeming universalization of disability. For example, Tobin Siebers (2001) critiques Haraway’s use of prostheses as misunderstanding disability:

Haraway is so preoccupied with power and ability that she forgets what disability is. Prostheses always increase the cyborg’s abilities; they are a source only of new powers, never of problems. The cyborg is always more than human-and never risks to be seen as subhuman. To put it simply, the cyborg is not disabled. (745)

Prostheses in the context of cyborgs, and I would argue glitches as well, use the language of power and enhancement, often removing disability from the discussions in favour of the prostheses as a tool to highlight and deconstruct hegemonic expectations of gender. While I do not want to make any assumptions about Sin Wai Kin, Russell does not present them as disabled, but rather as glitching gender by exaggerating it through drag performance elements. Disability is, recalling Siebers, used as an aesthetic to describe a special ability. This reflects an overarching trend of having a lack of meaningful presence of disabled voices, leading to misunderstandings, erasures, and as is the case with “gender prosthesis,” recontextualizing the disabled body to fit a metaphor. In other words, glitches and cyborgs are trans, but are not disabled.

The lineage of the cyborg raises questions on whether glitches can be an intersectional oppositional tool in the form they have been presented thus far. Recalling Siebers, when disability is limited to merely aesthetic content, or in this case metaphor, it does not consider lived experiences. I argue that glitches are in danger of repeating this same (non-) action as cyborg feminism, which re/decontextualizes disability and removes disabled people from any active role in the blurring of binary roles.

Conclusion

Glitches can be a powerful orientation through which to seek the creative possibilities of difference, which is important to trans people, disabled people and those at the intersections of transness and disability. The examples of glitch art that I have highlighted, through the use of the language of function, prosthesis and vandalism, evoke disability

aesthetics to represent the fragility of systems of gender. These artworks, either in their creation or the scholarly interpretations, decontextualize disability, removing it from the body of work. The many trans interpretations of glitch art imagine a world where disability is an aesthetic or language meant to stand in for a larger collective meaning, but these worlds do not imagine disability.

Glitch art may present a tool for imagining an alternative, a possibility, an action or a non-action to challenge systems of gender. Disability may be unconsciously present in the interpretation of glitch art, but disabled experiences should be present in contributing to and imagining an alternative future that glitches seek to represent. In trans art and game scholarship that neglects and decontextualizes disabled bodies, removing disabled experiences from interpretations of and conceptualizations of glitch art, this tool fails to function as oppositional to hegemonic and normative assumptions about the body. The glitch is there, but it has not been exploited in a way that will break the system. As a tool to avoid universalization, imagine an alternative, and understand systems and self, glitches can be useful, but the oppositional practical elements are still pending.

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