

## IMHO, a column

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### Welcome to Cyberia

There is a set of engineering issues that are common to all technological arts in the digital age: sampling, fragmentation and reassembly, data compression and expansion... and the glitch. We like the glitch, not because it formalistically reminds us what we are seeing is an artifact (it does), but because in our encounter and by developing our relationship to the glitch, we can enter into a dialogue with our technology on its own terms, negotiating for points of contact between what we-as-audience will accept and what we reject as technological failure, as an interruption to our fantasies of dominance, power, mastery.

The digital pretends to allow us access to abilities beyond our competence because it is so technically perfect. In searching out the glitch we find ourselves in cyberia, encountering the artifacts left-over from our technological abstraction. This experience has the potential to become a dominant paradigm for our encounters with mediated reality. When we encounter the glitch the limits of our technology become apparent to us. It causes a manifestation of the interpretative limits to our technology and our ability to prevent that technology from degrading over time. What we call a glitch is a variety of entropy revealing the secret language of digital technology.

### Glitch

In its perfection, the digital introduced new kinds of signal-to-noise degradation. This decay was unexpected, a reminder of the connections between the virtual and the physical that digital media seeks to hide. By exploring these realms we can discover the limits of our technical competence; the points where our technology impedes us rather than enables functionality. While in principle digital "objects" are infinitely reproducible, the reality is these "objects" exist as real-world electrical signals subject to physical effects. One copy may be exactly the same as another, but only so long as nothing interferes with that copy to degrade it.

The glitch shows us the paradox beneath the claim of perfect replication, exact copying, infinite availability. While the digital does allow complete, perfect replication, it also offers possibilities for complete loss, total system crash. The glitch is the transient failing, the momentary lapse that allows us to see underneath the mask at the reality hidden inside the digital representation: How much data has been lost to faulty storage, poor transmission, or obsolete technology? How much more will we lose in the future? These are the questions of cyberia that make us aware of the glitch. We find at the heart of the digital a paradox unresolved—the illusion of infinite reproducibility, perpetual reproduction and replication—forces us to confront the glitch as the inevitable limit to our extended reach. Glitch is technology talking back to our fantasies of the infinite.

Once we discover the glitch, like addicts, we want more. For technojunkies, the glitch is endlessly fascinating, the final aspect of the real playing into the virtual realities we're told to desire. It is the latest Gnostic moment, for hatred of the physical body runs deep, a desire to place "mind and spirit" above the corporeal, ignoring the intimate connections all our virtualities have to mundane physicality. (Cyberspace was born a fantasy from its start in Neuromancer.) The glitch brings us back into reality from cyberia. The desert of virtuality grows only vacuum flowers, glowing and efferescent, side-effects of other processes. We only become aware of this link to the real when the glitch interrupts our fantasy with a 404 Error—blue screen of death—pixelization: the digital medium impinging upon our transparent reveries before the screen. The glitch shows us the screen, not our fantasy displayed upon it. Broadband, DSL, T-1 each only

serve to mask the technological window into cyberia, bringing things faster, so we see less of the medium, and more media. We set the digital in motion and it generates itself on our command.

## **Rip, Mix, Burn**

The extension of virtual media will eventually change the marketplace as we know it, leaving behind only fetish objects whose actual contents are infinitely available: the lessons of mp3 music swapping are already readily visible. It provides suggestions about what the future may be like when media such as music is free, (the songs available now, here... everywhere, legal or not), the only reason to purchase the album is to own an object, singular and special in itself as a thing independent of the music it might contain. Physical recordings begin to take on the same quaint quality we reserve for hand-blown glass, traditional carvings, paintings. Commercial CDs become specialty products, luxuries for enthusiasts, the same way that vinyl records are now a minority interest item, important only to specific subcultures (the DJ and scratch subcultures are the most obvious examples). The music and digital "content" are secondary to our purchase. In a triumph of form over content, we buy not for its contents, but for the package. Design culture triumphs. This paradigm is a potential (nacent) future for all digital media. In this future, the glitch plays a prominent role in our technological encounters.

## **Cyberia**

When the glitch comes, we have fully entered into cyberia. It is a state without a direct physicality (in the way grooves cut in vinyl are physical)—everything we encounter in digital media is a second-order (re)presentation given to us by ingenious devices that speak their own digital language inaccessible to humanity, but wholly dependent on us for its existence. This is a machine world built to service us even as we find new uses for it. It is one where the glitch reigns supreme, the final ruler of cyberia, because to destroy a thing is to control it. The glitch that arises from machine failure reminds us of our powerlessness before the technology we have built.

Neither celebration nor fear are appropriate responses to this development. It is the side-effect, the afterburn, of our technology reaching a kind of maturity. It gives us the potential to remake portions of our civilization in different terms, much the same way the printing press enabled a basic change in European civilization that has produced, ultimately, the digital. The movement towards abstraction is implicit in this development; the glitch is always an abstraction—it is the eruption of digital representations into the realm of human encounter: the ways the digital interprets its data enables our meeting in cyberia.

As artists we can choose to engage this glitch preemptively, before its dominance becomes immediately apparent. Art may provide a means to understand and frame our phenomenal relationship to the glitch in terms other than as-interruption in the seamless transparency of cyberia. We need encounters with the glitch that are independent of its hijacking of our experiences, a terrorist that destroys our encounter with digital media.

A formalist answer to this problem neglects the human angle. The glitch is a way to see what our technology typically hides from us: the actual functioning of its processes, events that come into motion only because we have set them into motion. Formalism makes machines that exclude the human, while these machines exist only to extend our human capabilities. We are already cyborgs whose cyberspace is a vast, unexplored, mechanized wasteland that stands apart from human experience. Cyberia is a place we can only see through the glitch.

As our civilization becomes increasingly a resident of cyberia we create new names for our experiences. "Art" should be one of those names. It offers us a way of reaching an understanding of our technology and our relationship to it.