

[feral glitch]

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Abstract

This experimental video essay theorizes the feral glitch, a technical rupture within video game engines that opens possibilities for playing, making, and imagining games beyond the normative structures of dominant video game culture. Instead of assuming that ferality is synonymous with randomness, the essay understands it as a condition of technical indeterminacy emerging through contingent relations among bodies, hardware, software, and nonhuman forms of agency. It takes transgender artist and game developer Jamie Faye Fenton's *Digital TV Dinner* (1979) as a historical point of departure. Created through the intentional misuse of a Bally Astrocade console, Fenton's cascading glitches transform technical malfunction into an embodied encounter between artist, machine, and computational error. Drawing from queer game studies, materialist feminist media theory, and animal studies, the essay considers how glitches can operate as queer mechanics of failure and persistence while unsettling tidy distinctions between humans, machines, and nonhuman animals. At the same time, it complicates the politics of ferality by considering how visibility, animality, and wildness are shaped by histories of marginalization and settler colonialism. Extending these questions into contemporary game engines, the essay examines Brent Watanabe's *San Andreas Streaming Deer Cam* (2015–16) and Alice Bucknell's *The Alluvials* (2023), two works that transform *Grand Theft Auto V* and its RAGE engine into spaces of nonhuman wandering, ecological speculation, and alternative modes of play. Through its own fragmented, collaged, and glitch-based form, the essay ultimately proposes the feral glitch as both an aesthetic practice and a mode of relation where video games might be played and inhabited otherwise.

Transcript

Note: this transcript was written by the author, and it was not copy-edited by *The Digital Review* or the Praxis Studio for Comparative Media Studies.

A computational error isn't a failure to be corrected, but a vital pulse of life. This essay explores the *feral glitch*, a technical rupture within contemporary game engines that embodies something wild and radically other.¹ A convulsive media form that emerges not only from what Rosa Menkman calls the destructive generativity of technical errors, but from queer, nonhuman, and animal energies that allow new possibilities for playing and making videogames beyond the often oppressive and heteronormative frameworks of dominant videogame culture and triple A developers.²

A theory of *ferality* is grounded in three overlapping frameworks: queer game studies, materialist-feminist media theory, and animal studies. Together, these approaches reimagine glitch, not just as a malfunction, but as an *agential* creature that encourages us to play games otherwise. Here, ferality does not simply mean

¹ The editing of this video essay incorporates found footage drawn from public-domain materials held by the Prelinger Archives, Mario Perez Video Collection, Library of Congress, and Public Domain Review. It also incorporates gameplay footage from multiple videogames that have been altered, composited, and datamoshed as part of the essay's exploration of feral media aesthetics. Because these images are intentionally fragmented and transformed through the editing process, individual gameplay clips are not identified on screen. A complete list of videogames featured in the essay is provided in the Works Cited.

² Rosa Menkman, "Glitch Studies Manifesto," in *Video Vortex Reader II: Moving Images beyond YouTube*, ed. Geert Lovink and Rachel Somers (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2011), 342, 344.

randomness. Rather, it names a condition of technical indeterminacy that emerges through contingent relations among bodies, hardware, software, and computational error. A feral glitch may be unpredictable, but it is never without material conditions. It emerges when the normative operations of gameplay are disrupted and agency becomes distributed across player and machine, allowing the system to exceed predetermined outcomes of mastery and control. Ferality, then, is less the randomness of an error than a mode of relation: a way of playing with and becoming attuned to the unpredictability of computational systems.

The year is 1979. A Bally Astrocade console is jolted from its flow. A cartridge is yanked out and a fist slams its plastic surface. What emerges is the video work *Digital TV Dinner*, a psychedelic cascade of corrupted memory dumps, created by Jamie Faye Fenton and collaborators Raul Zaritsky and Dick Ainsworth. It is widely regarded as the first work of glitch video art. Fenton, a queer and trans artist and programmer, knew the Astrocade inside and out because she helped code it. The glitches, produced through Fenton's gestures of hitting the console and removing a cartridge, serve as an embodied and queer misuse of a system designed to behave for standard gameplay. In this moment of rupture, something feral slips out from underneath the comfortable interface of an Astrocade game.

To many gamers, a glitch is just that, a bug. Frame drops, broken animations, boundary breaches, physics going haywire. A hiccup in the system. But theorists like Menkman remind us that glitch is also a *reveal*.³ It's the moment the system exposes its inner operations when an interface collapses under its own noise. A glitch is a game engine radically exploring its material contours as it ignores the technical rules it was told to follow. Glitch, then, also becomes a site of queerness. Of failure not as the typical cycles of die and repeat, but as radical difference that works outside the racism and misogyny of toxic gaming cultures.

Yet, this refusal of normative systems also raises questions of visibility. José Esteban Muñoz reminds us that queer life has often persisted through ephemeral traces, gestures, performances, memories, and other forms of evidence that resist becoming fully legible. For historically marginalized queer subjects, visibility is not always liberation; leaving too much of a trace can also invite surveillance, forms of discipline, or violence.⁴ The feral glitch, then, might offer a similar politics of partial illegibility. Like queer ephemera, glitch leaves evidence that something has happened without necessarily making that event completely knowable. Its distortion can become a mode of persistence: a trace that remains while refusing the demand to become fully visible, classifiable, or controlled.

Bo Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw argue that *queer game studies* upends the dominant binaries of gaming: narrative/play, win/failure, control/agency, pleasure/frustration, competition/reward, player/engine.⁵ To call these mechanics queer is not to suggest that queerness simply means disruption, nor that queer identity is interchangeable with the nonhuman. Queerness includes lived identities and histories, but queer game studies asks how those histories can reshape the structures through which games are played. For Ruberg, mechanics such as permalife challenge conventional cycles of death, mastery, and progression while giving form to queer experiences of persistence within a world organized around heteronormative identities. A game mechanic

³ Rosa Menkman, "Glitch Studies Manifesto," 344.

⁴ José Esteban Muñoz, "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (1996): 10, 12.

⁵ Bo Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw, *Queer Game Studies*, ed. Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), ix-x.

becomes queer, then, not because it breaks a rule, but because it reimagines how queer bodies and lives persist within, and play against, systems not designed for them.⁶

Merritt K. and Naomi Clark go further, claiming glitch itself is a queer mechanic of failure. One that disrupts winning/losing and mastery/expertise through the uncontrollable and often unplayable nature of technical error.⁷ Whit Pow extends this, placing *Digital TV Dinner* in a *trans* historiography of glitch. What Pow calls “unmediation” is Fenton’s embodied refusal of normative play. Her actions, slamming, ejecting, breaking the flow, are trans gestures that reconfigure our assumptions of who normally plays games and the possibilities for what games can do.⁸

The feral glitch is not just queer, it is *nonhuman*. Drawing from Karen Barad’s agential realism, glitch emerges through what Barad calls *intra-activity*, or the boundless agential forces of things, Astrocade engine, Fenton’s fist, corrupted pixels, mishandled ROM cartridge, that continually remake material space-time configurations. Fenton’s glitch is not hers alone. It is a co-extension of the Astrocade’s hardware, its memory buffers, the software code, and her own bodily acts, a continuously unfolding ecology of things that resists tidy discursive boundaries. Barad reframes the apparatus as a material-discursive entanglement and not as merely a technical instrument used for empirically observing the world. An apparatus serves as a constellation of boundary-making practices, techniques, and perceptual effects in which the feral glitch emerges through a process of *becoming-with*. An ongoing choreography of forces at once human, machine, and spectral. Here, nonhuman and animal are not interchangeable terms.⁹ The nonhuman names a broader field of agencies that exceed human-centered accounts of the world: machines, plants, animals, objects, code. Animality names a more particular relation within that field. Humans, of course, are animals too; the distinction is not biological but conceptual. To think through animality is therefore not to oppose animal to human, but to unsettle that very boundary, to encounter forms of embodiment, perception, and agency that resist organization around human mastery.

And yet, glitch is also animal. Since the modernity of the late 19th century, human beings have defined themselves in negation to the animal being. In our strange distance to the animal world, we have anthropomorphized the animal into an uncanny other. As Akira Lippitt observes, these humancentric views that assign identity and embodiment to the animal are unconscious forces that operate beyond conscious thought. He situates these unconscious energies of the animal as a technical metaphor for cinema, suggesting that the electromagnetic force of moving images articulates the otherworldliness of animal being. Lippitt calls this the animetaphor, a nonhuman residue that haunts media. For Lippitt, the animal is not just creature, but *an electric unconscious*. A force that cannot speak in language, yet pulses through image, memory, and cinematic form.¹⁰

In the 19th century, as psychoanalysis and cinema emerged, thinkers like Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer theorized the *hypnoid state*, a split in consciousness, a prelinguistic condition where unspoken drives stirred

⁶ Bo Ruberg, “Permalife: Videogames and the Queerness of Living,” *Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds* 9, no. 2 (2017): 159–73: 160-161, 162, 171.

⁷ Naomi Clark and Merritt Kopas, “Queering Human-Game Relations: Exploring Queer Mechanics & Play,” *First Person Scholar*, n.d., <https://www.firstpersonscholar.com/queering-human-game-relations/>.

⁸ Whit Pow, “A Trans Historiography of Glitches and Errors,” *Feminist Media Histories* 7, no. 1 (2021): 197–230. 202, 203.

⁹ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007), 133-136.

¹⁰ Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 7-8, 164-165.

beneath the rational self. Lippitt links this to the *animal unconscious*: an affective, electromagnetic force, uncaptured by language, yet omnipresent. Cinema becomes, in his words, a “mausoleum for animal being”, a technology haunted by nonhuman energies.¹¹ So too with glitch. It is the unconscious convulsion of the game engine’s technical rules that speaks through memory dumps, flickers, and compression artifacts. The glitch is not broken, it is *feral*. Not dead, but a vibrant animal.

This comes to life in Brent Watanabe’s game mod *San Andreas Streaming Deer Cam*. Here, a deer, programmed with *Grand Theft Auto V*’s pedestrian AI using the RAGE game engine, wanders freely through the vast game map of San Andreas. It cannot be controlled by a player and yet it becomes a glitchy force of chaos: triggering police chases, explosions, pileups. At one point, the deer is launched into the air by a muscle car, landing stiffly across a bridge, a glitchy rigor mortis encoded in textures and polygons. Watanabe’s deer is a nonhuman intelligence roaming an algorithmic wilderness. A *queer posthuman figure*, as Ruberg writes, that at times longs for connection to the human world yet seems to unintentionally destroy the gameworld through its skittish actions. The deer’s nonhuman embodiment, its body, wild expressions, and desire for human connection, takes on a posthumanism that champions non-normative gender and sexuality. Here, the inability for the player to control the deer opens up a feral space that moves beyond hegemonic modes of videogame play.¹²

In Alice Bucknell’s *The Alluvials*, both a machinima and playable game, this feral energy takes on speculative and ecological forms. Built with Unity and modded *GTA V* environments, *The Alluvials* imagines a climate-collapsed future Los Angeles, weaving together anthropomorphic entities, a revitalized yet synthetic river system, and the company Aquarius that produces H3O, a new kind of water filled with mood stabilizers to help the population cope with, as Bucknell tells us, a world constantly on fire. Throughout its levels, the player becomes a wildfire. The LA river. A Joshua Tree. A Yucca Moth. In one level, you become a “first-person pollinator.”¹³ Moth antennae dangle in view as you drift through the air, pollinating ancient Joshua Trees in a symbiotic embrace among egg-laying moth and its tree host. Or you play *as* a Joshua Tree, using voice to attract moth colonies, sending bursts of rhizomes through the desert floor.

Yet, the language of ferality also carries a colonial history that cannot be ignored. Cree scholar Billy-Ray Belcourt reminds us that animality has never existed outside the politics of land, race, and settler colonialism. Colonial power has repeatedly animalized Indigenous peoples while transforming land and nonhuman life into property to be controlled. From this perspective, the feral cannot simply name a romantic escape into wildness. Instead, it asks us to consider how colonial systems turn land into property while defining certain bodies, creatures, and ways of living as wild, unruly, or out of place.¹⁴

In this case, it’s helpful to look at Alenda Chang’s concept of *bit narratives*, digital stories told from the vantage of nonhuman entities: plant, animal, object, code. Like the “it-narratives” of the 18th century, where the speaker might be a shoe or a dog, bit narratives give agency to the digital assets of contemporary media systems. They ask: *What does it mean to play as a river? A glitch? A moth in flight?* Like the deer in *San Andreas*,

¹¹ Lippitt, *Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife*, 187, 196.

¹² Bo Ruberg, “After Agency: The Queer Posthumanism of Video Games that Cannot be Played,” *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 28, no. 2 (2022): 413-430, 415.

¹³ Alice Bucknell, *The Alluvials* (US, 2023).

¹⁴ Billy-Ray Belcourt, “An Indigenous Critique of Critical Animal Studies,” in *Colonialism and Animality: Anti-Colonial Perspectives in Critical Animal Studies*, ed. Kelly Struthers Montford and Chloë Taylor (Routledge, 2020), 21–23.

these entities glitch the engine by existing on their own terms. They carve space for queer and ecological imaginaries to flourish within, and against, the logic of the system.¹⁵

There is no reward or progression within these modes of aimless play. Not death but instead what Bo Ruberg calls permlife, a subversive response to “permadeath” where players die, respawn, and continue to gain mastery over the game. For queer artists and game designers, these experiences of permanent “in-game” life work as a palliative measure against symbolic violence enacted within dominant gaming cultures.¹⁶ We also witness permlife mechanics in Watanabe’s *San Andreas Streaming Deer Cam* as an unplayable game that situates the “player” within the uncanny space of observing an animal-machine intelligence in action. The feral glitch, queer, nonhuman, animal, is at once a mechanic of refusal and affirmation of playing videogames otherwise. It channels noise into the efficient playbook of capitalism, heteronormativity, and control.

But glitch is not only something we study. It is something we *practice*. This video essay, fragmented, voiced, collaged, is itself a feral act. A critical media form that resists the clean logic of representation. As Legacy Russell says, embody glitch as an:

“...all-consuming joyful failure within a system that never wanted us and that will not make space for us if we simply wait for it... Inside of this beatific brokenness and as we travel beyond it, we ask: What’s next? Where to go from here?”¹⁷

I don’t know where we will go from here. There may not be a “*here*” for us to progress toward or arrive at. Yet, from the boundary-making practices of glitch aesthetics, what we *can* do is imagine new worlds and ecological possibilities by deconstructing the authority of game engines; playing, and living, life otherwise through a feral howl at the moon.

¹⁵ Alenda Y. Chang, *Playing Nature: Ecology in Video Games* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 124, 128-29.

¹⁶ Ruberg, “Permlife: Videogames and the Queerness of Living,” 161-62, 169, 171.

¹⁷ Legacy Russell, *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto* (London: Verso, 2020), Introduction, “00 – Introduction.”

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