Notes on Glitch

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What follows is the result of an off-and-on confabulation taking place between the authors for over a year—a collaborative attempt to both define and theorize a set of practices that is known by various names: databending, datamoshing, image hacking, and of course glitch art. These "notes" are not intended to be exhaustive or in any sense final, but instead represent a set of loosely organized postulates that others might revise, debate, critique or extend.

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1. Almost invariably, digital imagery greets its beholder in the guise of analog—as a smooth and seamless flow, rather than as discrete digital chunks. A glitch disrupts the data behind a digital representation in such a way that its simulation of analog can no longer remain covert. What otherwise would have been passively received—for instance a video feed, online photograph, or musical recording—now unexpectedly coughs up a tumorous blob of digital distortion. Whether its cause is intentional or accidental, a glitch flamboyantly undoes the communications platforms that we, as subjects of digital culture, both rely on and take for granted.

2. The existence of glitch-based representation depends upon the inability of software to treat a wrong bit of data in anything other than the right way. The word "glitch" in this sense does not solely represent the cause that initiates some failure, but also the output that results when improper data is decoded properly. An isolated problem is encountered and, rather than shutting down, the software prattles on. Stated differently, it is a given program's *failure to fully fail* upon encountering bad data that allows a glitch to appear. The instigation of such defect-driven churning is the crux of the practice known as Glitch Art.

3. Standard dictionaries fail to define the word "glitch" except in relation to analog technology. The first documented usage in English belongs to John Glenn, in reference to voltage modulations encountered during an early manned space flight.[1] Despite being rooted in analog culture, however, there is one aspect of the dictionary definition that both endures in digital glitching and in a strong sense defines it: the momentary or punctiform nature of the initiating impulse. A glitch is a "surge," "a sudden short-lived irregularity in behavior" (*OED*), whose aftereffects are at once shocking and effusive. The garish appearance and obstreperous sound of glitch art betokens its origination in this way: *a tiny variance has triggered major damage.*

4. Although in some cases the production of glitch art may require a great deal of effort, its basic premise is opposite. Glitch art aims at drastic results, derived from seemingly insignificant alterations. One does next-to-nothing and *voilà!*