

# What *Remains?*



# What Remains?

## Glitch Art & Mental Health

*Dedicated to Jan Sverre Sørensen 13.6.2023.  
A grandpa most beloved.*

## Links

Game: <https://kingduckiv.itch.io/what-remains>

*Should be played full screen with headphones.*

Playthrough of the game: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BMm4vGA\\_K2k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BMm4vGA_K2k)

Video presentation of the game: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iNDvk0L6ooI>

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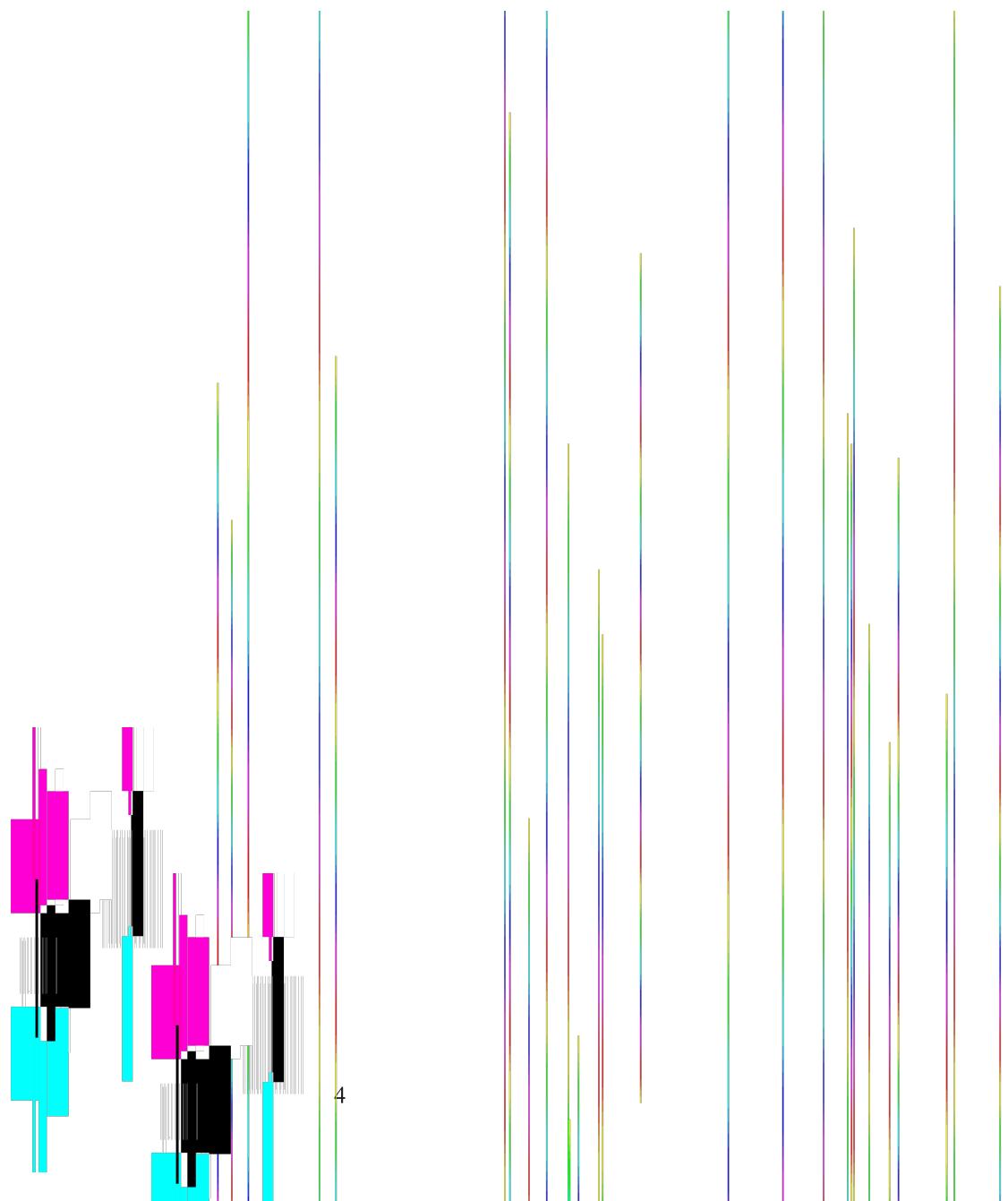
## Preface

Making *What Remains?* has been a rough ride for me personally. Not because of deadlines or artistic blocks, but due to its very personal nature. I grew up in a medium sized village in the southwest part of Norway. A lot of the things depicted in the story are reflections upon my own life or of people I hold dear to my heart. Bullying, broken homes, neglection and death are all things that have impacted me personally. I was bullied verbally and physically to the point of early childhood suicidality. My home was broken, my stepfather a verbally berating drunk and my father absent. I spent my early adult years stumbling through life trying to figure out why I was so miserable and felt so undesirable. I moved out at an early age.

With a heavily deteriorating mental health I set foot into the world of adulthood without much guidance. At the precipice of my declining mental health, I had a psychotic breakdown and was placed at a mental ward for 6 months where I got to confront my problems and got to meet people with severe problems of their own. In my mental breakdown I experienced auditory hallucination. I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder 2 and Agoraphobia. Some of those I spent time with within the mental ward were paranoid schizophrenics who saw and heard things that weren't there. At this point I had the scary realization that we are all just a complex web of neurons, chemicals and electromagnetic impulses. Our human operating systems are very easily broken or malfunctioning. So, if a glitch is the malfunction of a system or communication between systems, then mental health problems are its ugly sibling. So, I set out to make a work that shows the inherent similarities between mental deterioration and glitch art. The glitches in the work are my attempt at showing how it feels to experience hallucinations and apparitions.

## Introduction

This paper investigates the link between glitch art and mental illness through the process of making an interactive work of fiction. It will give an overview of the relevant literature, outline and detail the making of the game, and analyse the end product. Through the creation of the interactive work, I was able to find a strong link between the malfunction of glitch art and the malfunction of mental illness. The visually degrading nature of the assets, the sudden bursts of noise and sound, along with the more surreal aspects of the writing towards the end of the work proved an effective measure in creating narrative harmony between the plot, and the visual and auditory components of the work.



## Inspirations and similar works of art

There have been many artworks that showcase the element of glitch art that made me fall in love with the genre. When it comes to music, I adore Black Metal and its use of noise. I also listen to experimental, Avant-garde music like Björk and her use of the glitch aesthetic, which can be heard in her song *Pluto* (1997). By far my biggest inspirations when it comes to visual artworks are the visual novel *Doki Doki Literature Club* or *DDLC* by Team Salvato (2007) and the installation *Can't Help Myself* by Yuan and Peng (2016). Both use glitching as part of the aesthetic though not in the same way. *Can't Help Myself* for example features a robot that endlessly cleans up red liquid, a meaningless task, until it malfunctions and stops working (See figure 1).



Figure 1: Yuan, Sun and Yu, Peng. *Can't Help Myself*. 2016. Robot messily trying to clean up red liquid as the hydraulics slowly stop working.

*DDLC* on the other hand specifically produces the effect of the games code and files malfunctioning through visual assets and audio slowly breaking apart (See figure 2).

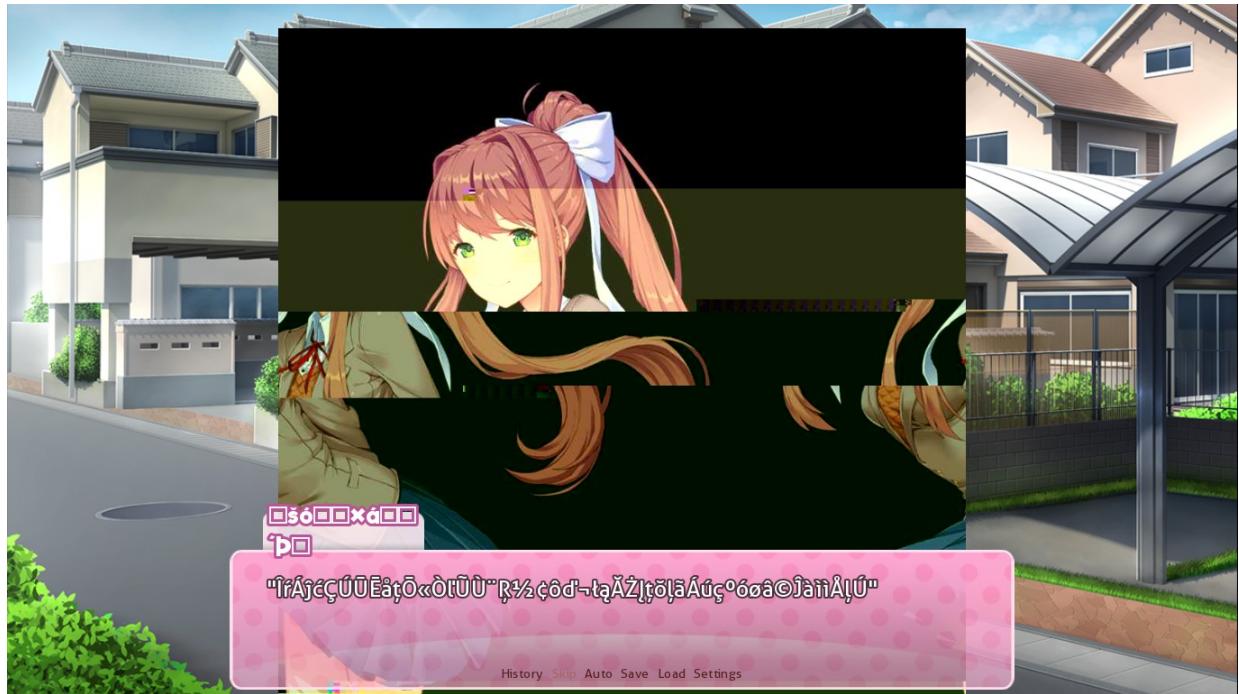
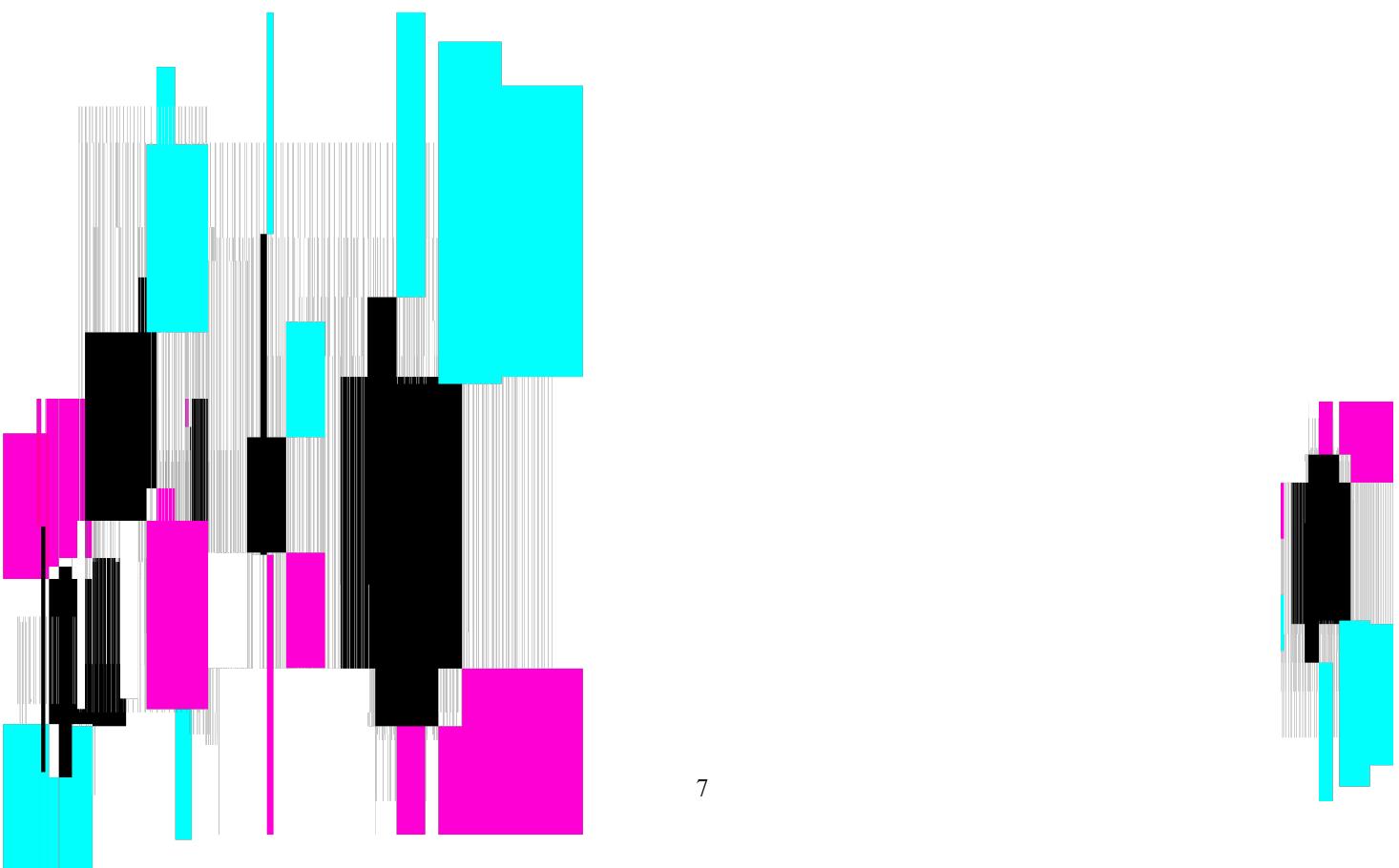


Figure 2: Salvato, Dan. *Doki Doki Literature Club. 2017: A character and text glitching.*

*Can't Help Myself* malfunctioned organically and *DDLC* is not actually malfunctioning, it's just made to look like it is. *What Remains?* is closer to *DDLC* than *Can't Help Myself*. I wanted to explore if Glitch Art, especially visual and auditory glitching can function as a simile or metaphor to mental deterioration in digital narratives. I wanted to explore how noise in art relates to noise in life. To find out if auditory and visual glitching can be evocative of auditory and visual hallucination.

## Who cares?

Stories have been told all throughout human existence as far as we know. They function as entertainment and leisure activities. They function as retelling of historical events for educational purposes. But they are also one of the main ways our culture shapes itself, evolves and conforms. Morals, ethics and empathy are taught through stories. A paper by Johnson published in the journal Personality and Individual Differences in 2011 showed a direct link between reading narrative fiction and increased affective empathy (Johnson, 154, 2011). My work is important because it adds to a medium of literary work that explore the trouble of some of the most unfortunate people in our society. To shine a light on the horror that is mental illness. Through art and through stories like *What Remains?* we can simulate and in turn put the viewer in place of someone suffering these illnesses. In a world ever polarized and antagonistic, adding to the body of works that showcase these stories are greatly important.



## Finding meaning in noise: Literature overview

The meaning of glitch according to Oxford dictionaries is both a noun “a sudden, usually temporary malfunctioning or fault of equipment” or a verb “suffer a sudden malfunction or glitch” (Oxford 2023). In Betancourt’s book *Glitch Art in Theory and Practice: Critical Failures and Post-Digital Aesthetics*, he writes “Glitch procedures engage and reflect technical failures in digital systems- one is tempted to describe glitch as “courting disaster”- since the result of these processes verge on a complete systemic/structural failure” (Betancourt 2016. 3). A glitch is often unintentional. Something that happens when either hardware, software or both fail to communicate properly. Glitch art is usually the intentional malfunction of these elements for the creation of an artwork. Glitch as a critical element of a work requires the person experiencing it to understand that the glitch was intentional and not a random malfunction (Betancourt, 2016. 160). A game that stops working unintentionally due to badly made code will not affect the player the same way a game like *DDLC* would. When *DDLC* stops working intentionally the player assumes it is part of the story and it adds to the sum of the game experience.

## Visual and auditory Glitch

Visual and auditory glitches have been used in movies, games, digital narratives, and digital art. You find it in both the mainstream, mostly as minor uses of the glitch aesthetic, and in digital art. Horror games and movies seem to make great use of glitching to scare and elicit fear. The use of such glitches can be seen in games like Red Barrels’ *Outlast* (2013), which feature a protagonist with a camera that malfunction and make white noise when an enemy is near (see figure 3). TV shows like CWs *Supernatural* regularly feature scenes of radios and TVs that malfunction when supernatural entities are coming (See figure 4). In the TV show *Max Headroom* (1987-1988), actor Matt Freyer portrays a faux CGI character that through film techniques and prosthetics were made to look like it was a glitching computer creation (Buckmaster 2023) (see figure 5).



Figure 3: Petty, J.T. *Outlast*. 2013: Camera malfunctioning as enemy comes near.



Figure 4: Kripke, Eric. *Supernatural*, season 2, episode 21 “All Hell Breaks Loose Part 1”: A radio malfunctioning as something supernatural happens.



Figure 5: Stone, George. *Max Headroom*, season 1, episode 1 “Blipverts”: Faux CGI character lagging as if malfunctioning.

These are all examples of simulated visual and auditory glitches as opposed to organic glitches that occur when you tamper with hardware or code. *Free Radicals* (1979) by Len Lye uses a technique where you scratch patterns into film stock to create patterns. This is an example of glitch art that is made intentionally but is not just a simulation of glitch.

## Glitch Music and Noise

As music evolved into the late twentieth century and into the twenty-first century manipulating or breaking equipment to create glitched elements or noise in music became more and more commonplace (Kelly 2009, 3). The transformation and evolution of the technology used by musicians further escalated the ways in which artist could create glitch music (Kelly 2009, 6). In music, glitched sounds and static noise are major features of genres like Hip hop, rap, metal, avant-garde and alternative music. Hip hop and Rap make use of turntable scratching (Kelly 2009, 88). This is created by turning a vinyl record back and forth on a turntable which creates a scratchy rhythmic sound. You can hear this in the intro of N.W.A.s *Fuck Tha Police* (1988).

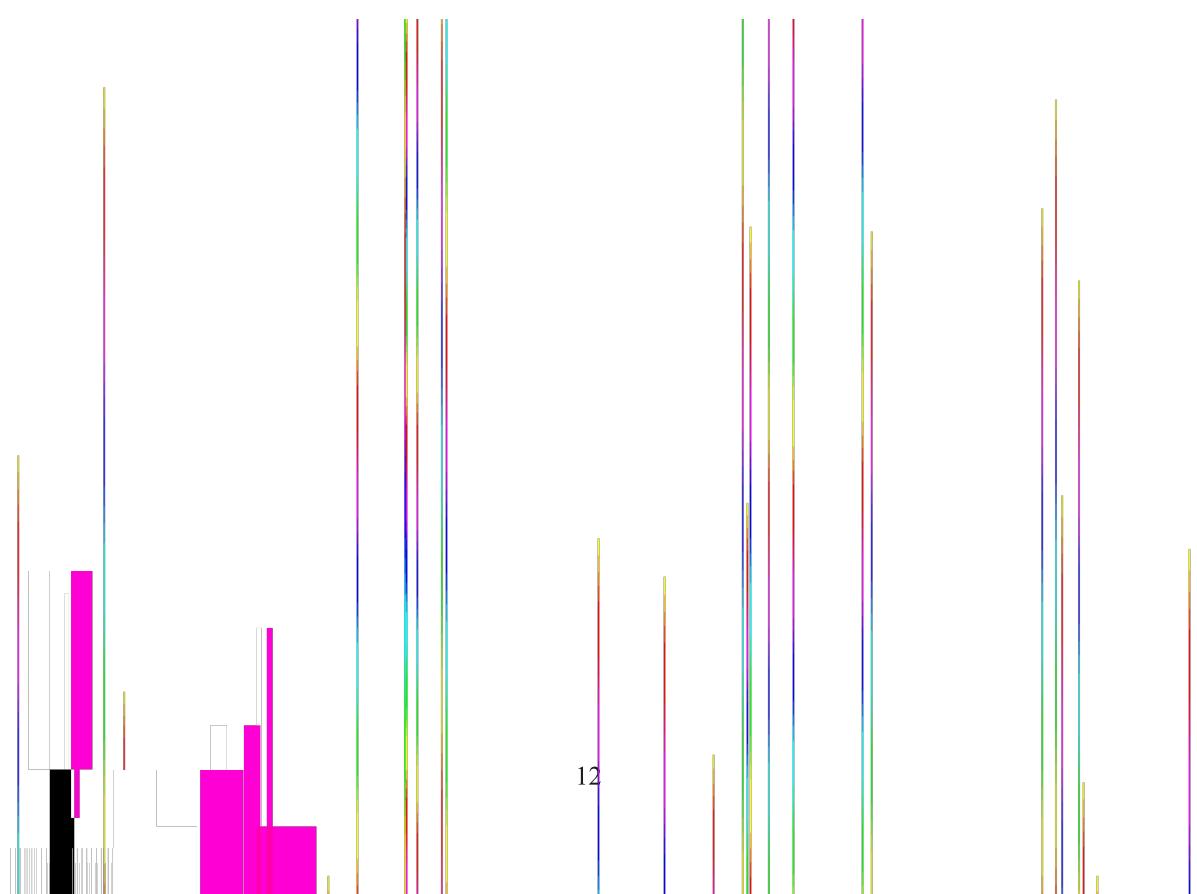
In Rap and Hip hop this effect is used to create rhythm and complement the beat of the song. You can hear a similar effect on *Bulls on Parade* by Metal-Rap quartet Rage Against the Machine (1996), though this not an actual turntable being scratched, it's a recreation by Tom Morello on the electric guitar. These two examples serve the same function, they both create rhythmic accompaniment to the song, but one of them are made by the malfunction of a record player and the other by simulating a malfunctioning record player. Tom Morello also uses white noise produced by taking the jack cable from the guitar and into his hand to create high pitched percussive elements as showcased in the song *Sleep Now in the Fire* (1999). Both N.W.A and Rage Against the Machine feature political messages of discontent towards police and authority, a feature that will become more extreme with other music genres that feature glitched sounds and noise.

Similarly, to Tom Morello's method, but functionally different, Black Metal have used noise and hardware failure to create its white noise soundscape. In Black Metal the noise is not a rhythmic element but an atmospheric element meant to represent dissonance and distaste for normalcy (Sholihyn 2017). The infamous Black Metal artist Varg Vikernes recalls the making of his album *Filosofem* on his blog where he writes about using the worst equipment he could find so that the sound signal would break and distort (Vikernes 2005).

Though not related or derived from, Black Metal have many common traits with Noise Music, or more specifically the most extreme subgenre, Japanese Noise Music. In the same way noise in Black Metal music is used to show discontent for societal norms and are a rebellious creation against the music industry (Sholihyn 2017), Japanese noise music is a genre that also rebels against consumer culture (Kelly 2009, 64). An example of Japanese noise music is *Hantarashi* (1985) by Hantarash. Not only does the music of both genres have similar soundscapes and techniques of achieving noise, but Hantarash live shows, like Black Metal live shows, featured gruesome acts like cutting a dead cat in half with a machete and in general being violent (Nations, unknown date). Glitch elements and noise feature in both mainstream and niche music that try to show discontent.

## Auditory and Musical Importance

Glitches are in essence historically rooted in deformation and disturbance. Deformation, much like other movements within art like dada and surrealism it deals with the aesthetic of failure and noise (Gintere, 359, 2019). Now, I won't go into the psychology of mental illness, but it is important to show the relationship between glitch art and mental illness. In making the game I wanted to provoke empathy and understanding of mental illness, proving the relation between the two. A study in the journal Academic Psychiatry found that participants empathy for those suffering from auditory hallucination, increased after being subjected to manufactured auditory hallucinations (Bunn & Terpstra, 458-459, 2014). Music is also heavily linked with mood and emotion. Clark quotes Kramer in her book *Psychology of Moods* "The influence of music stems from its ability to alter moods, communicate feelings, and to provide auditory distraction." (Clark 2005, 145). A study review by Juslin and Laukka also shows that music can change and affect our mood and emotions (Juslin and Laukka 2004, 232-233). Music also has the ability to change perceived morality in movies. Participants viewed the actions of a character more or less righteous depending on the music being played. (Steffens 2020). For these reasons music was a big component of my planning and creation process.



## **Methodology**

To find the relationship between glitch art and mental illness I created a work of art through a process called practice-based research; to explore a thesis through the creation of X, in this case an interactive narrative.

Firstly, I started by creating a mental map of scenes, periodically writing down ideas on my phone. Then I started writing small script ideas, what text was going to appear to the player as the scenes played. My first idea of a platformer was scrapped in favour of a visual novel style. Still, many of the scenes and scripts were used in the result.

The assets were made in photoshop by drawing with the lasso tool and filling in with black, white or shades of grey. By creation of assets, experimenting with breaking them apart and figuring out what made the glitched assets more impactful, I created the visual juxtaposition of the game. The use of noise, distortion, blur and displacement to change assets away from their normal visage.

The sounds were created in a digital audio workstation where slicing, pitch shifting, tempo and meter changes, distortion, and white noise were used to tamper with the synthesizers. Creation of white noise or static was created by virtual amplification devices and electric guitar signals.

There were a lot of scrapped assets and sounds that did not end up making the cut as their quality or perceived effect on the result did not match up with my original intent.

## Creating “What Remains?”

### The Start: A lesson in disempowerment.

When I set out to investigate my thesis by making a digital narrative, I had to confront what form it would take. The options were endless. It could be anything from a visual novel to a full-fledged platformer. First, I tried to make my game a platformer (See figure 6), but I quickly found out that the glitched nature of my narrative was better served with a visual novel style.

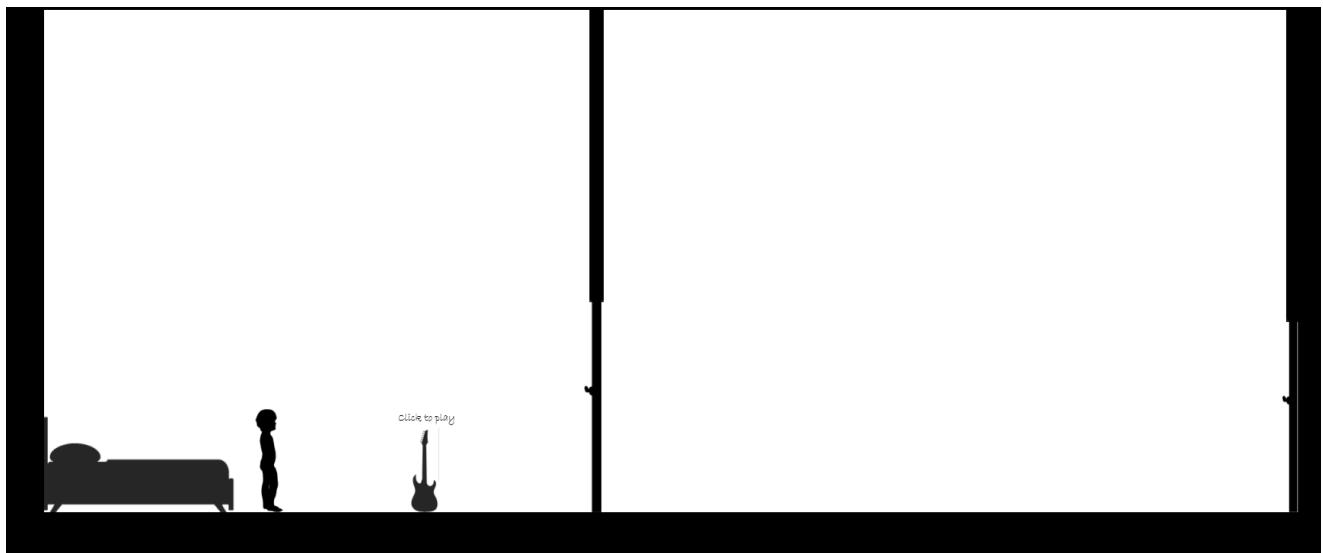


Figure 6: *What Remains?* first draft: Early platformer version of my work.

It was easier to create the pacing needed for the glitches to be impactful and properly sequenced. It became apparent early on in my creating and playtesting that the glitches had more of an impact when the player had limited control over the pacing. Moving a character created the opportunity for triggers to become apparent and the glitches that are supposed to represent and explore uncontrollable mental deterioration became less impactful. It is important to note that a more skilled game developer who has a further developed knowledge of Construct 3 could possibly make a platformer with the pacing needed to have the same impact. I needed to limit player control to maximise the feeling of disempowerment.

I found that disempowerment was important to the narrative, due to the nature of mental illness being both limiting and uncontrollable. For the player to experience the malfunction of the game and the players perceived mental health, disempowerment through limited ludology was key. Most of the ludic elements in the game are simple in nature. You can click on some objects to either gain a bit of additional story, easter eggs or references. Sometimes you must press certain objects to proceed the story. In some scenarios you must choose between two options, but these don't have any real effect on the story but do reveal different dialogue. Player movement was a limiting factor to achieving the negative player emotion needed to simulate mental deterioration. Negative player emotions like sadness are not usually found in the parts of games that incorporate gameplay, but rather inactive moments of games such as cutscenes (Filipe, 10 2017). So rather than making a platformer with player movement as the main interactive part, making a visual novel where ludic elements are easily taken away heightened the emotions I was looking to evoke. As I delved into the idea of disempowerment as a key factor to my thesis, I set out to create a sequencer in Construct 3 that made it easy to give and take control away from the player.

## **Visual Novels, but not?**

The visual novel can be summed up as a narrative packaged with a specific visual element more akin to that of the old point and click adventure games, but often with less ludic elements. It's like a novel, but scenes are also visualized like an image book, but often includes branching paths and ludic elements. In his book *Anime and the visual novel Structure, Design and Play at the Crossroads of Animation and Computer Games* Cavallaro describes visual novels specifically as requiring players to be agents of play that employ both text analysis skills and puzzle solving skills (Cavallaro, 10, 2009) My game lacks those certain ludic elements and therefor I struggle to call it a visual novel.

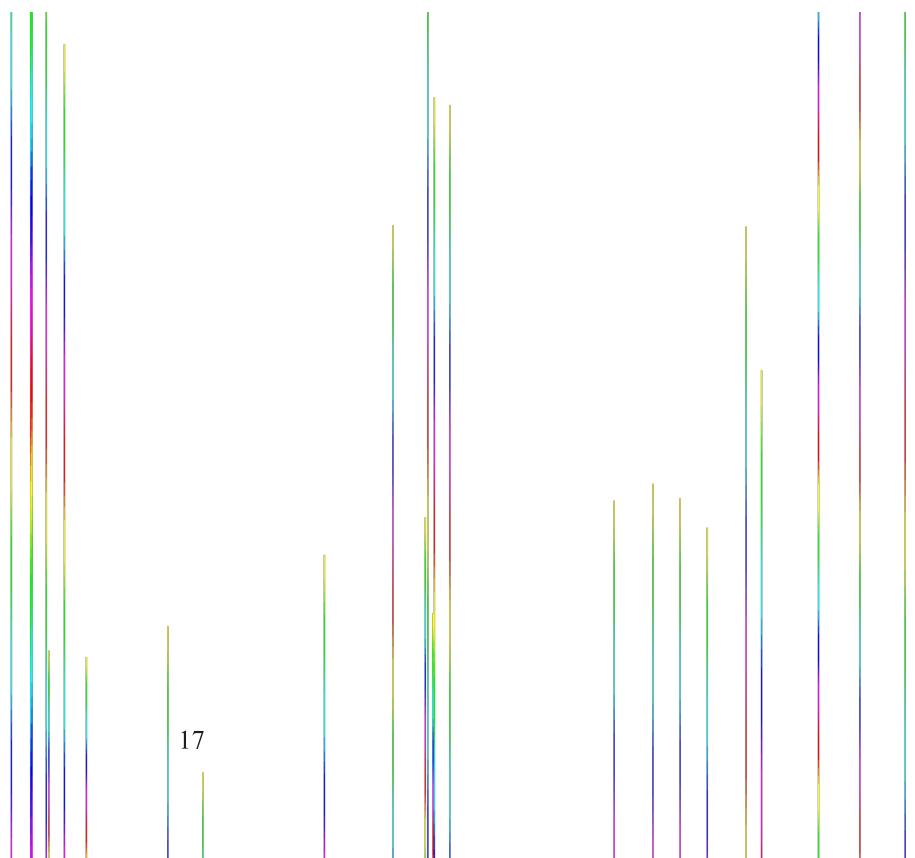
It looks like a visual novel, and for the most part it plays like a visual novel, but there are no real player choices. The story is linear no matter what the player chooses, and there aren't puzzles or highly interactive elements. The book is 14 years old at this point and the medium has surely changed, but still, I prefer to call it a digital narrative as it eludes certain predetermined ideas about the experience of the game. As Scott Rettberg writes in his book *Electronic Literature* Genre is mostly just a pragmatic function to make navigating art easier (Rettberg 2018, 15). All of this to say that aesthetically it looks like a visual novel, but it doesn't function as one.

## Incorporating Glitches

As mentioned earlier in the literature overview music and sound have the ability to affect mood and emotions. So, it was imperative to create a soundscape that would be harmonious with my wanted result. I spent a long time trying to figure out what sort of soundscape I wanted to use. I found that a mixture between calm synthesisers and sudden bursts of intense white noise or static along with text corruption (Zalgo) was quite effective at giving the effect I wanted. Glitch elements and noise in music have historically been linked with discontent. The fear that comes with unwanted, sudden bursts of hallucinations could be achieved by scarce uses of this. The visual novel starts off with a calming synth soundtrack and no auditory or visual glitches. As the game progresses the glitches become more and more apparent as the game starts to emulate breaking apart. The soundtracks, noises and visual assets become more and more deformed. As the player progresses, the visual assets will start to glitch, which are made to look like loss of data, as if the game no longer has the files of the images.

## Digital Soundscapes and the meta narrative

The vast majority of the music made for the game was made by Virtual Studio Technology (VST) synthesisers. The sound of most synthesisers are digital in nature. Sine waves oscillating to emulate different sounds. There are 2 narratives happening in my project. It's the things that affect the player and the things that affect the protagonist. The narrative and the meta narrative. The player is experiencing a game breaking apart. Unnatural noises, asset corruption and red tinted colours are there to affect the player and their meta narrative. In this case a game about a child experiencing the horrors of early mental illness and the game representing the same type of malfunction. The character in the game has their emotional and mental health affected by the written narrative, the plot. The glitches are representations of the protagonist's mental state, not always directly what the protagonist experiences. Choosing to make the soundtracks have a digital aesthetic is for the player. To feel like the game is corrupting on their end. To achieve varying degrees of white noise I put a jack cable through a virtual amplification simulator that distorts the signal and creates white noise/static. Then I spent some time putting it against different surfaces that create different levels of interference with the cable. This creates a varying degree of pitch and strength. There are no acoustic instruments in the game as this would subtract from the meta narrative of data corruption. For miscellaneous sound effects like punches and vomiting I used a Zoom h4n recorder, layering sounds and elements in post.



## Visual Aesthetic

In his master thesis, Wu explains that the design of objects and surroundings are important to create cohesion with a game's plot, setting and theme. He details many different forms of cohesion between design and style, and narrative (Wu 2012. 100-109). The game is made in shades of grey with the occasional red spread throughout. The reason for this stylistic choice is that grey is a rather monotone colour. It functions as a metaphor for the drab, the monotonous, apathy and anhedonia. We describe things of a negative nature as dark or grey. Describing the weather as grey has a negative connotation meaning that the weather was bad or not to your liking. We describe a negative period of our lives as a dark time. When talking about mental illness or rough periods the aesthetic of black, grey and white are perfect to evoke the feeling of monotony, anhedonia and apathy.

The game also focuses on the protagonist who is a young child. Children are often afraid of the dark. Darkly figures, shadows and pitch-black function as a doorway into the mind of a child stuck in a bad place, scared and fearful. Red is used only in times where I try to communicate anger, angst or to visualize blood. It's used very sparingly as to not saturate the meaning too much. Colours can have many meanings; it all depends on context and culture. Red is, at least in many western cultures, correlated with romance, anger, passion and blood. In a movie like *Bronson*, it is used to encapsulate the feeling of being stuck inside overwhelming anger (see figure 7). In a movie like *American Beauty*, it is used to symbolize sexual passion (see figure 8). The context of my game and the wording of the story makes it clear what the red means in the moment (see figure 9). It was important to show the feelings of the character not just through the written word but also in a visual manner, creating a harmony between visuals and narrative. The story is dark, so the design is dark.



Figure 7: Refn, Nicolas Winding, director. Bronson. 2008: Bronson in prison surrounded by red/light, which mirrors the start of the movie. A metaphor for being unable to escape anger.



Figure 8: Mendes, Sam. American Beauty. 1999: The character Lester dreaming about a sexual encounter with a minor.



Figure 9: What Remains?: Showing the scarce use of red to signify anger.

## Reflections upon a deadline

When it comes to creating an artwork, you realize that there is no such thing as finished. You can only let go. I had a little over 3 months to create this and with the soft reset I made halfway through while realizing I needed to go from a platformer to a visual novel style, well time became a precious commodity. I would have liked to make it more polished and maybe even include more ludic elements like branching paths. In the future I would like to add more scenes, with more actual choices that can pace the games creeping glitches more evenly through. The slow descent into madness had to become a rather quick descent into madness due to time restraint. The work still stands as a success in my book, and I believe I managed to capture and evoke what I intended to do. I believe I proved my thesis.

## Conclusion

Throughout the journey of making What Remains? the relationship between glitch art and mental deterioration became apparent. Glitches are in essence something wrong, miscommunication, a failure. This works perfectly in art to evoke the feeling of mental deterioration which in itself is a failure of systems. Auditory glitches and auditory hallucinations functions as similes that can heighten empathy and emotional responses. I believe it succeeded showing that glitch art is a valuable aesthetic to use.

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