OSKARI O. KALLIO

COMEDY IN THE LUDONARRATIVE

DEFINING A FRAMEWORK FOR CATEGORIZATION OF GAMES FEATURING HUMOR THROUGH THEIR LUDIC AND NARRATIVE ELEMENTS

Master's Thesis
Aalto University School of Arts, Design and Architecture

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ABSTRACT

Although humor is a prevalent component of numerous video games, thus far it has not been converted to an established genre of its own. Comedy—the deliberate act to harness and perform humor—represents one, but an important segment of the emotional range that games should aspire to cover in order for them to be considered an artistic medium. This study examines the prospects, but also the challenges, that interactivity introduces to comedic narratives. The theoretical substructure of this thesis comes from the academic field of humor studies, and from various expert opinions as well. Ludonarrative comedy is approached through examples that illustrate trends that can be discerned from games that introduce humor through their narrative and gameplay-related, i.e. ludic, elements. The findings confirm the initial hypothesis that there are enough conventions present for ludonarrative comedy genre to surface. As a conclusion for the findings, a proposition for a general framework for defining comedic video games is presented.

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ABSTRAKTI

Vaikka huumori on olennainen osa monia videopelejä, toistaiseksi sitä ei ole onnistuttu muuntamaan omaksi vakiintuneeksi tyylisuunnakseen. Komiikka, eli sellainen tarkoituksellinen toiminta, joka valjastaa huumoria ja panee sitä täytäntöön, edustaa yksittäistä mutta yhtäältä tärkeää tunnealuetta, jota elektronisten pelien tulisi pyrkiä kattamaan jotta niistä voitaisiin keskustella taiteellisena ilmaisukanavana. Tämä tutkimus pyrkii osaltaan tarkastelemaan niin näkymiä kuin myös haasteita, joita vuorovaikutteisuus tuo mukanaan koomisiin kerrontoihin. Opinnäytetyön teoreettinen pohjarakenne tulee huumorin ja pelien tutkimuksen akateemiselta kentältä, sekä erinäisistä asiantuntijoiden näkemyksistä. Ludonarratiivista komiikkaa lähestytään sellaisten esimerkkien avulla, jotka havainnollistavat trendejä peleissä, joissa huumori ilmentyy tarinallisten ja pelillisyyteen liittyvien ominaisuuksiensa kautta. Tutkielman tulokset vahvistavat alkuperäistä hypoteesia siitä, että tälläkin hetkellä on olemassa riittävästi konventioita ludonarratiivisen komiikan vaikiinnuttamiseksi omaksi lajityypikseen. Tulosten päätelmänä esitetään ehdotus yleisestä rakenteesta koomisten videopelien määrittelemisen perusteeksi.

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1

Introduction

1.1

Foreword

More often than with films or books, video games are categorized by the loops of their gameplay rather than the emotions they evoke in their audience. "Platformer," "roguelike," and "open world role-playing game" are common terms in video game classification. These labels—although obscure to the general public—inform the player about the mechanics and the structure of the game of which they are descriptive. What the terms are not revealing, is the frame of mind they put the player in. With any discussion of video games, mechanics become an unavoidable talking point, but behind them is a theme, or an idea, that ideally conducts the course of action. There are cross-medium genres that are illustrative of the mood of a production, such as "horror" and "fantasy," yet games are rarely labeled with terms like "romance," "drama," or "comedy." This thesis delves into the often overlooked category of video games—comedy.

The term *ludonarrative*, coined by game designer Clint Hocking in (2007)[1], comes from the Latin word *ludus*, roughly translating into "game," and the word *narrative*, referring to a meaningful recount of connected events. Ludonarrative refers to the junction of gameplay and narrative elements in video games. In this thesis, video games which through their narrative and gameplay elements aim to induce humor, are referred as *ludonarrative comedies*. The research problem, and the aim of this study is to definine a framework for categorization of games that feature humor through their narrative and ludic elements.

1 Hocking, C. (2007). Ludonarrative Dissonance in Bioshock. [online] Click Nothing. Available at: clicknothing.typepad.com/click_nothing/2007/10/ludonarrative-d.html [Accessed 5 Mar. 2018].

1.II

Thesis Statement & Research Question

Although humor is a prevalent element in many games, only a few of them seem to warrant the "comedy" label. The few comic games that do exist, are proof of the comedic capability that the medium holds. Comedy is difficult, even more so when the element of interactivity is made part of the equation. Amusement—being one of the more demanding feelings to evoke—not only creates unprecedented challenges when interactivity becomes part of the equation, but also exciting possibilities. Ludonarrative comedy has not been fully deciphered yet, which makes it a compelling research topic. In many ways the medium of interactive entertainment is perfect for comedy. With the means of play, games can involve their audience in the comedy-making. Most games are generally considered "fun" but few are touted as "funny." Video games evoke feelings of joy upon triumph and feelings of disappointment upon failure, but the wider emotional scale is often underrepresented.

The appetite for humor is a fundamental human characteristic. People gravitate towards other funny people, tune into comedy podcasts, and share internet memes with their friends. Regardless of whether or not the industry is interested in establishing a comedy genre, humans will always look for reasons to laugh and to make other people laugh. Thereupon it is beneficial to study the ways people are entertaining themselves while playing games, and learn how laughter could be funneled into desired occasions. For these reasons I am interested in the research question: *Is it possible to define a framework, which could be used to categorize games based on their comedic ludonarratives*?

1.III

Contents and Objectives

Hookam and Meany (2015: 25–36)[2] proclaim that for video game comedy to be recognized as a genre, there must first be a consensus on the elements that contribute to it. This thesis aims to define the qualities that make ludonarrative comedy distinct from comedy in other media, and identify the problems in its execution. Topics, such as what type of comedy best corresponds to the strengths of the medium, and what happens when comedy is used as a framework for gameplay, are inspected. The research is qualitative and done in an exploratory manner. Theories of humor and their relation to ludonarrative comedy are reviewed along the way. The role of a game world, as well as the use of various comic enhancers are explored and exemplified. The curiosity lies in the questions "why," and "how." The aim is not to come up with definitive answers but to provide insight into the subject matter, to point out trends and underlying motifs.

Throughout this thesis, various applications of ludonarrative comedy are analyzed. The findings are reflected to the discoveries made in the field of humor research, as well as studies and writings about humor and game design. The comic premise, including the different comic conflicts are examined. Regarding the breadth of the subject matter: the topics of discussion and the representative cases are selected for their relevance to the subject matter. They exhibit trends that matter in the context of either video games or comedy. References to other creative media are made for illustrative purposes. Video game comedy is examined

2 Hookham, G. and Meany, M. (2015). Perspective Shifting: Humour and Comedy in Games. Proceedings of the 11th Australasian Conference on Interactive Entertainment, pp.25–34.

from the perspective of the game, the game designer, and the player alike. The broader topic of humor is also discussed due to its adjacency and dependency on comedy. Comedy, however, by the virtue of being the more specific and less debatable of the two constructs, remains the focus of attention. The unavoidable bias of this thesis is the author's own taste in comedy. Not only is a person's taste in humor subjective, but there can never be objective truth to be found on what is funny.

In this thesis, ludonarrative comedy is considered from various dimensions. In chapter IV, comedy is viewed from the performer's standpoint. The types of video game comedy are divided into two categories based upon the agency responsible for its performance. Chapter V focuses on the factors that make comedy possible in video games. The use of classic comedy techniques are reviewed in the context of many contemporary games. Humor's relation to the concept of normality is closely examined here. In chapter VI, the nature of comic reality is inspected, and deconstructed to three comic conflicts, that are are often used to create comedic tension. Chapter VII, that focuses on case studies, summarizes the comedic dimensions presented in the previous chapters. The final chapter, "Conclusions," recaps what has been discovered and offers general guidelines for aspiring ludonarrative comedians.

I.IV

Methods of Research

The writing process began by investigating the field of comedic video games of the past, playing them and finding points of view relevant to the subject matter. Despite the fact that video games are a relatively new medium, the scope of humorous games was revealed to be extensive. Sections of this thesis focus on

qualitative analysis of a variety of video games, that are meant to serve as anecdotes that illuminate broader trends in the context of ludonarrative comedy. For understandable reasons, many humorous games are omitted from the research—not for their lack of comicality, but for some other game illustrating an identical trend.

The basis for the research are the scientific, psychologic and philosophical studies on humor and comedy, as well as relevant literature on game design and video game writing. The multifaceted field of humor research forms the groundwork for arguments in this thesis. Rod A. Martin's extensive research in *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach* (2006)[3] is used throughout the thesis to explain the psychological and social aspects of humor. A large portion of the research is philosophically and psychologically oriented. Monro's three-division of humor theories (1988: 349–355)[4] to superiority, incongruity, and relief theories, are used as a reflection point that illuminates the diversity of humor and its applications. The theories are not regarded as mutually exclusive, but are used to describe different aspects of the same phenomenon. Furthermore, the efforts of Veatch (1998)[5], McGraw and Warner (2014)[6], and Adams, Dennett and Hurley (2011)[7], to discover common connective designs in all humor and to describe humor's role in organizing our subjective realities, are also inspected. The practice of harnessed humor, comedy, is approached through expert opinions and recognized comedy

3 Martin, R. (2006). The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach. 1st ed. Amsterdam: Elsevier Academic Press.

4 Monro, D. H. (1988). Theories of Humor. Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum. 3rd ed. Laurence Behrens and Leonard J. Rosen, eds. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman and Company, pp.359–355.

5 Veatch, T. (1998). A Theory of Humor. Humor: International Journal of Humor Research, 11(2), pp.161–215. Available at: www.tomveatch.com/else/humor/paper/index.html [Accessed 31 Mar. 2018].

6 McGraw, P. and Warner, J. (2014). The Humor Code: A Global Search for What Makes Things Funny. New York: Simon & Schuster.

7 Hurley, M., Dennett, D. and Adams, R. (2013). Inside Jokes: Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.

techniques. Vorhaus' (1994: 19–29)[8] description of the layers of conflicts in comedy are inspected through a ludonarrative lens.

Existing academic studies about humor and comedy in video games are scarce. Dormannn and Biddle (2009: 802–824)[9] are accountable for a considerable portion of academic research on the topic. In addition to their work, research from Grönroos (2012)[10], Hookam and Meany (2015: 25–34)[11], and Švelch (2014: 2530–2552)[12] are used to give insight on how humor and comedy is used in video games. Their points of view provide an outlook on comedy's potential and functions of in the interactive medium. Quinn's presentation at the 2015 Games Developer Conference, *Comedy Games: An Underexplored Genre*[13] also serves as a reference point.

The problem with humor research is that it seems to reject closer inspection and theoretical analyses. As Eastman (1936: 15)[14] points out, from reading the serious-sounding descriptions of humor by humor theorists, one would not get a picture of it as a playful, lighthearted activity. E.B. White (1941)[15] has also famously stated: "humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process." In order to get a more well-rounded image and to reach the core of the phenomenon, non-academic literature, various critical articles and expert opinions around the topic

8 Vorhaus, J. (1994). The Comic Toolbox: How to Be Funny Even If You're Not. Beverly Hills, California: Silman-James Press, pp.19–29.

9 Dormann, C. and Biddle, R. (2009). A Review of Humor for Computer Games: Play, Laugh and More. Simulation & Gaming, 40(6), pp.802–824.

10 Grönroos, A. (2013). Humour in Video Games: Play, Comedy, and Mischief. Master. Aalto University School of Art, Design and Architecture.

11 Hookham, G. and Meany, M. (2015). Perspective Shifting: Humour and Comedy in Games. Proceedings of the 11th Australasian Conference on Interactive Entertainment, pp.25–34.

12 Švelch, J. (2014). Comedy of Contingency: Making Physical Humor in Video Game Spaces. International Journal of Communication, (8), pp.2530–2552.

13 Quinn, Z. (2015). Comedy Games: An Underexplored Genre. Available at: www.gdcvault.com/play/1021867/Comedy-Games-An-Underexplored [Accessed 1 Jun. 2017].

14 Eastman, Max. 1936. Enjoyment of Laughter. New York: Halcyon House, p.15.

15 White, E. and White, K. (1984). A Subtreasury of American Humor. Norwood, Pennsylvania: Telegraph Books, p.XVII (Preface).

are also referenced. Viewpoints by people in the field of game development and game journalism, in addition to the world of comedy are taken into account.

In this thesis, the term "video game" is used to describe digital artifacts, loosely linked together for their audience-involving quality in generating visual feedback through player interaction. Research and literature on game design and video game writing is used to support the arguments made here. Game design theory and the role of play in our culture have been studied by Juul (2003)[16], Koster (2013)[17], Huizinga (1938)[18], Hookam and Meany (2015: 25–34)[19]. Furthermore, Dill and Platten (2007)[20], Fernández-Vara (2009)[21], as well as Salen and Zimmerman (2003)[22], have written about the narrative aspects of video games. Voices of various game designers, authors, journalists, philosophers, comedians and comedic writer are heard in several parts of this study.

16 Juul, J. (2003). The Game, the Player, the World: Looking for a Heart of Gameness. [online] Available at: www.jesperjuul.net/text/gameplayerworld [Accessed 22 Sep. 2017].

17 Koster, R. (2013). A Theory of Fun for Game Design. 2nd ed. Sebastopol, California: O'Reilly Media.

18 Huizinga, J. (1947). Homo Ludens. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

19 Hookham, G. and Meany, M. (2015). Perspective Shifting: Humour and Comedy in Games. Proceedings of the 11th Australasian Conference on Interactive Entertainment, pp.25–34.

20 Dille, F. and Platten, J. (2007). The Ultimate Guide to Video Game Writing and Design. 3rd ed. New York: Watson-Guptill Publications.

21 Fernández-Vara, C. (2009). The Tribulations of Adventure Games: Integrating Story into Simulation through Performance. Doctoral Dissertation. Georgia Institute of Technology.

22 Salen, K., Zimmerman, E. (2003). Rules of Play. Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

11

About Comedy and Humor

11.1

Logic on Leisure

Comedy is the performance of humor, which is why comedy cannot be analyzed without the understanding of what humor is. Hookam and Meany (2015: 25–34)[23] proclaim humor being an "ability to perceive or express the intentional or unintentional comic elements of life," and comedy an "intentionally structured cultural product that employs particular forms and conventions to create the affect of amusement in an audience." Martin (2006: PREFACE) [24] describes humor as "a ubiquitous human activity that occurs in all types of social interaction. It infuses meaning to the meaningless and takes it away from matters that are perhaps too meaningful." According to Martin (2006: 4)[25], humor has biological roots in our genes, but cultural norms and learning define how it is manifested in individuals. Nonetheless, the underlying algorithms and patterns in "funny" remain a mystery. Although various humor theories attempt to describe what is at the core of a humorous experience, humor does not exist in theoretical form. That is to say there is no accepted unified theory of funny, nor a formula for humor creation—only intuition. Humor theory is reverse engineering, as it can ever only dissect what has been said and laughed at. Humor comes into existence with its performance.

Humor is a human condition. People gravitate towards humorous affairs as they proactively look for reasons to laugh. We

23 Hookham, G. and Meany, M. (2015). Perspective Shifting: Humour and Comedy in Games. Proceedings of the 11th Australasian Conference on Interactive Entertainment, pp.25–34.

24 Martin, R. (2006). The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach. 1st ed. Amsterdam: Elsevier Academic Press, p.XV (Preface).

25 Martin, R. (2006). The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach. 1st ed. Amsterdam: Elsevier Academic Press, p.4.

are willing to pay for laughs to take a rest from logical thinking. Jokes share similar characteristic to riddles: they stimulate the mind but do not overstrain it nor do they feel like work. The brain feels self-congratulatory when it figures out a joke. Adams, Dennett and Hurley elaborate (2013: 49)[26] on the connection of humor and problem solving: "There is an undeniable similarity between the joy of humor and the joy of problem solving. When we 'get' a joke we feel a sense of discovery rather like the sense of triumph when we solve a problem. And when we are unable to solve a problem, there is a sense of confusion or missing knowledge that is reminiscent of the feeling we get when we are unable to get a joke." We get drunk on awe. The feeling of understanding or figuring out a problem gives us satisfaction. As Carl Sagan has famously said: "Understanding is a kind of ecstasy."[27] Understanding is also the key to comedy. Adams, Dennett and Hurley consider humor as a reward system to keep our brains attentive (2013: 31)[28]. According to them, our curious brains are working unceasingly to make heuristic assumptions on our surroundings, to anticipate what experiences might be forthcoming in all domains. Adams, Dennett and Hurley explain that this time-pressured anticipation process would inevitably lead to errors in our consciousness and clutter our knowledge, if it were not for a mechanism that would verify or disregard the vast amount of hypothetical beliefs and surmisings that our brains generate. They suggest the mechanism that supports this activity is the feeling of humor—also called *mirth*. According to their theory, humor optimizes and prioritizes storage in our brain by generating excitement and rewarding us with satisfaction.

26 Hurley, M., Dennett, D. and Adams, R. (2013). Inside jokes: Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, p.49.

27 Sagan, C. (1983). Broca's Brain: Reflections on the Romance of Science. 7th ed. New York: Ballantine Books, p.17.

28 Hurley, M., Dennett, D. and Adams, R. (2013). Inside Jokes: Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, p.31.

Martin divides the psychological functions of humor into three categories: cognitive and social gain caused by the feeling of mirth; social communication and influence; and coping mechanism and tension relief (2006: 15–20)[29]. Positive emotions, such as mirth make people approach problems with increased creativity. Games that focus on problem solving can benefit from the comedic approach, since according to Martin, it makes players to demonstrate more effective thinking and organizing skills in addition to inspiring more creative thinking.

11.11

Video Game Medium as a Template for Comedic Narratives

Interactive entertainment is a fitting, but under-utilized medium for comedy. Grönroos (2012)[30] ponders that the apparent lack of humor in video games might be a question of recognition, with interactive humor taking new unfamiliar forms: "games use humor in ways that are unfamiliar from other media, and often humor elicits amusement instead of laughter." Eastman (1936: 15)[31] points out that humor is a form of play in itself: "No definition of humor, no theory of wit, no explanation of comic laughter, will ever stand up, which is not based upon the distinction between playful and serious." Subsequently, Fry (1963)[32], who noted that

29 Martin, R. (2006). The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach. 1st ed. Amsterdam: Elsevier Academic Press, p.15–20

30 Grönroos, A. (2013). Humour in Video Games: Play, Comedy, and Mischief. Master. Aalto University School of Art, Design and Architecture.

31 Eastman, Max. 1936. Enjoyment of Laughter. New York: Halcyon House, p.15

32 Fry, W. F. (1963). Sweet Madness: A Study of Humor. Palo Alto, CA: Pacific Books.

humor is essentially a form of play, and Berlyne (1969)[33], having studied the close relation of humor and play, have come to similar conclusions. Gruner (1997)[34] also emphasizes the playful nature of humorous aggression. By deciding to engage with a game, the players are already in a playful state of mind, which is at the center in the humorous experience. Psychologist Michel Apter (1991: 13–31)[35] calls this state a "protective frame," a psychological safety zone that people create in both, play and humor. This private world is shared with people who are invited in the partaking of either of them. Johan Huizinga[36], who considers play from a cultural point of view, calls it "the magic circle." Huizinga (1947: 10–11), and later, Salen and Zimmerman, who adapted the term to further regard virtual forms of play (2003, 94–98)[37], describe the magic circle as a make-believe space that disregards rules and laws of actual reality and replaces them with the rules of the play.

For the external observer, ludonarrative comedy does not seem to differ much from traditional comedy where narrative sequences unfold chronologically. Games, however, are fundamentally different from other traditional media. According to Juul's definition (2003)[38], games are enthralling, player-influenced and effort-requiring rule-based systems with variable and quantifiable outcomes that have value assigned to them, but having negotiable consequences. Gonzalo Frasca (1999)[39] emphasizes that

33 Berlyne, D. E. (1969). Laughter, Humor, and Play. In G. Lindzey & E. Aronson (Eds.), The Handbook of Social Psychology (2nd ed., Vol. 3, pp. 795–852). Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

34 Gruner, C. (1997). The Game of Humor. 1st ed. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers.

35 Apter, M. J. (1991). A Structural-Phenomenology of Play. In J. H. Kerr & M. J. Apter (Eds.), Adult Play: A Reversal Theory Approach. Amsterdam: Swets & Zeitlinger: pp.13–31.

36 Huizinga, J. (1947). Homo Ludens. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. pp.10–11

37 Salen, K., Zimmerman, E. (2003). Rules of Play. Massachusetts: The MIT Press. pp.94–98.

38 Juul, J. (2003). The Game, the Player, the World: Looking for a Heart of Gameness. [online] Available at: www.jesperjuul.net/text/gameplayerworld [Accessed 22 Sep. 2017].

39 Frasca, G. (1999). Ludology Meet Narratology: Similitude and Differences Between (Video)Games and Narrative. Parnasso, [online] (3). Available at: www.ludology.org/articles/ludology.htm [Accessed 5 Mar. 2018].

the player agency is what deviates traditional narratives from interactive narratives: "Observers are passive, the player is active. If the player does not act, there will be no game, and therefore no session at all." Furthermore, he stresses that "play" and the "narrative" are not one, but play can lead to the creation of a narrative.

II.II.I
THE COMPLEXITY OF LUDONARRATIVE COMEDY

Ludonarrative comedy generates unique design problems. Comic timing, the fundamental and unforgiving factor in any kind of comedy, can be easily impaired by the participating player. Jokes or comedic bits are not enough. The contemporary format requires insight about the strengths of the medium. Quinn delves into the well-nigh absent comedy genre in a GDC presentation *Comedy Games: An Underexplored Genre*.[40] Comparing the neglected ludonarrative comedy genre to the established ludonarrative horror genre, she argues that the barriers to successful video game comedy are not mechanical in nature. Quinn points out horror and comedy sharing many of the same qualities: they aspire to take their audience by surprise; with both there is usually a set-up and a pay-off; and the design problems are similar, such as the efforts to keep the material fresh. Quinn suggests that only by considering comedy as a mechanical foundation for gameplay, as well as having a firm understanding of what drives humor, the potential of video game comedy can be realized.

Big video game publishers seem to avoid the comedy label. Tim Schafer, recognized for his portfolio of comedic video

40 Quinn, Z. (2015). Comedy Games: An Underexplored Genre. Available at: www.gdcvault.com/play/1021867/Comedy-Games-An-Underexplored [Accessed 1 Jun. 2017].

Horror and Comedy utilize comparable building blocks.

games, explains (SUELLENTROP, 2017)[41] that early in his career, while presenting ideas to publishers, he would deliberately hide the comedic aspirations of his game concepts: "One of the funny things about pitching Full Throttle[42] was that it didn't sound like a comedy at all. And I wouldn't say it was a comedy. At a high concept, it's a biker on the run for a crime that he didn't commit. There's nothing funny about that." Schafer illuminates that although his concepts appear serious from afar, they are funny on the ground level. Most developers seem to avoid designing their games around humor, which is why it is often used like a seasoning, to add flavor to the end result but with little relevance to the overall design. It is hardly ever integral, but instead disposable. Pratchett (MACKEY, 2009)[43] stresses that this sort of approach does not lead into true comedy. "Good humor needs to be built in. It should be the chocolate chips in the gooey cookie of gaming, rather than chocolate sprinkles on top." Luis Hernandez (PORTER, 2014)[44], the creator of the video game *Jazzpunk*

41 Suellentrop, C. (2017). Tim Schafer Talks Shyness and Being Asked Not to Touch George Lucas. [online] Rolling Stone. Available at: www.rollingstone.com/glixel/interviews/tim-schafer-talks-shyness-come-backs-and-george-lucas-w476760 [Accessed 5 Mar. 2018].

42 LucasArts. (1995). Full Throttle. Windows.

43 Mackey, B. (2009). No Laughing Matter: Making Humor Work in Games. [online] Gamasutra. Available at: www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/132586/no_laughing_matter_making_humor_.php [Accessed 25 Aug. 2017].

44 Porter, M. (2015). Why Is It So Hard to Make a Funny Video Game?. [online] Vice. Available at: www.vice.com/en_us/article/5gk8e8/2014-was-a-vintage-year-for-funny-video-games-889 [Accessed 5 Mar. 2018].

(2014)[45] ponders whether it is actually the game design conventions that are unsuitable for comedy, rather than the medium in itself: "A lot of game developers have been taught to think about design in a very economic way, so that most games revolve around one or two 'core mechanics' for the duration of the entire game, with a difficulty ramp. I don't think this approach is conducive to comedy." He argues it being akin to a comedian going on stage and only telling knock-knock jokes.

Full commitment to comedy is seen as a risk because bad comedy has no value. A funny joke is a source of joy, but a bad one can be downright detrimental. Wolpaw (AGNELLO, 2012)[46] is also in belief that comedy is a gamble. "Drama either fails at a base level, passing you by without you noticing, or it fails to the point where it becomes comedy. When comedy fails, it fails hard. It's unwatchable. It's unlistenable," Wolpaw argues, "bad comedy becomes nothing." In stand up comedy the failure to make the audience laugh is referred as "bombing." The comedian "dies" on stage. The violent terminology indicates that failed comedy is not met with shrugs, but with offense. Bell, having studied responses to failed humor (2009), proposes that the reason bad jokes make the listeners angry is because they are taken as an insult to the audience's sense of humor: "When a joke is actually funny, listeners don't mind the disruption because there is a payoff: humor. Without the humor, listeners may become annoyed at the lame crack."[47]

Comedy that is build around strict rules and rigid systems rarely works, because they usually impede the surprise factor of

45 Adult Swim Games. (2014). Jazzpunk. Windows.

46 Agnello, J. (2012). Funny People: Ron Gilbert, Maniac Mansion and Monkey Island creator. [online] Gameological. Available at: www.gameological.com/2012/07/funny-people-ron-gilbert [Accessed 23 Aug. 2017]

47 Bell, N. (2009). Responses to Failed Humor, Journal of Pragmatics 41(9): pp.1825–1836. Available at: www.researchgate.net/publication/248452297_Responses_to_Failed_Humor [Accessed 30 Mar. 2018].

humor. By the way video games are produced, it is difficult for non-integral comedy to make it all the way to the final product. Substantial amount of game development is about trial-and-error playtesting. Constant playtesting equals repetition, which is known to sour even the funniest of jokes. Humor is a transient delight. Repetition—when used correctly—is a comic enhancer, but without variation it can make the humor disappear. If the built-in systems are unable to produce sufficient variation, repetition becomes an argument against making comedy a core mechanic in a game. Root (GONZALEZ AND SMITH, 2017)[48] is of the same mind that mechanical repetition and video game comedy mix like oil and water. "Surprise is one of the keys to comedy, and it's difficult to pull off in a game with repeat plays," he reasons. Gameplay benefits from repetitive actions as the player gets better at performing them, but as games go through quality control and hours of playtesting, jokes are the first ones to be disposed of since they do not stand retelling. Schafer also emphasizes that game designers must be hypersensitive about repetition.[49] "There is an old expression," he says, "don't put humor on the inner loop. Nothing is funny that many times in a row. OK, I just made that up but it's true. Characters need to change up what they say, not just to keep the humor fresh, but to make the character seem more real." Quinn compares playtesting for comedic games to stand-up comedians who are constantly refining their material with fresh audiences.[50] "Test early, test often and with new people," Quinn instructs. The role of playtesting should not be about discarding comedy altogether,

48 Gonzalez, L. and Smith, M. (2004). A Brief History of Video Game Humor. [online] GameSpot. Available at: www.gamespot.com/articles/a-brief-history-of-video-game-humor/1100-6114407 [Accessed 22 Aug. 2017].

49 Pratchett, R., Schafer, T., Teti, J. and Vanaman, S. (2010). Make 'Em Laugh: Comedy in Games. Available at: www.gdcvault.com/play/1012287/Make-Em-Laugh-Comedy-in [Accessed 30 May 2017].

50 Quinn, Z. (2015). Comedy Games: An Underexplored Genre. Available at: www.gdcvault.com/play/1021867/Comedy-Games-An-Underexplored [Accessed 1 Jun. 2017].

but to make it funnier. When comedy is considered a mechanical underpinning in the overall design, its existence is always justified.

Abbott (2010)[51] argues comedy being "cerebral, technical, and deeply human," and furthermore notes that of those three factors, comedic video games often stumble in the "deeply human" department. Abbot supports his claim with the gradual disappearance of comedic games towards the new millennium, when video game visuals started transitioning from primitive to more photorealistic. He links the proposition to the uncanny valley theorem, which maintains that the closer a human replica gets to a real human, the more unnatural it appears to the (human) observer. "The uncanny valley is nobody's friend, but it's an especially harsh environment for comedy," he concludes. When games fail the comedic Turing test, something about their humor is likely too foreign, too unrecognizable to be considered funny. What can fill the deeply human void in ludonarrative comedy is the player, but there are fundamental and largely unaddressed problems when using comedy as a component in gameplay. When the player's efforts result in failure, they are more likely to be in a disappointed, rather than in a jovial mood. Failure can certainly be turned into comedy—as long as the players themselves are not the laughing stock. As Mel Brooks phrases it: "Tragedy is when *I* cut my finger. Comedy is when *you* fall into an open sewer and die."[52] Dying by falling into an open sewer is a fitting video game metaphor, but the quote also reveal something about the self-importance of the player: even the most minor complications can turn their amusement into agony. One of the key questions in ludonarrative comedy is how to make players to commit to

51 Abbott, M. (2010). Knock em dead. [online] Brainy Gamer. Available at: www.brainygamer.com/the_brainy_gamer/2010/07/comedy.html [Accessed 28 Sep. 2017].

52 Brooks, M. and Reiner, C. (1994). The 2000 Year Old Man—The Complete History. [CD] Rhino Records.

comedy. Totilo (2004)[53] calls attention to the dualistic role a player is designated in a video game. Players are not only members of the audience, but also playing the part of the lead actor. When a game's objectives are clear and the gameplay revolves around active verbs, the player can be expected to play their part, but when the concept of "nuance" is introduced, requirements for the player's performance increase. "It's easy for a game designer to make someone feel like Bruce Willis or Sly Stallone by putting a virtual gun in their hand. But how do you go about making someone feel like Charlie Chaplin or Bernie Mac," Totilo contemplates.

Ludonarrative comedy has a lot of potential, but its inclusion creates unique challenges for the developers. Narratives are less linear compared to cinema and literature. The element of gameplay should not only be taken into account but accepted as the basis for every comedic bit. The pace is not controlled by the story architects, but by the player. The role of the game designers is often to just nudge them to the right direction.

II.II.II

THE VISUALITY OF LUDONARRATIVE COMEDY

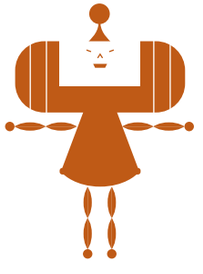
Humor has an aesthetic dimension that is recognized by several thinkers and academics. Morreall (1981: 57)[54] proclaims that aesthetic experience is the basis of all humor is. Gordon (2012: 62–70)[55] in turn describes humor as being "aesthetic to the extent that it arouses the viewers' imagination, provides them with insights

53 Totilo, S. (2004). Why aren't video games funny?. [online] Slate Magazine. Available at: www.slate.com/articles/technology/gaming/2004/11/joystuck.html [Accessed 6 Mar. 2018].

54 Morreall, John (1981). Humor and Aesthetic Education, Journal of Aesthetic Education. 15 (1), p.57.

55 Gordon, M. (2012). What Makes Humor Aesthetic?. International Journal of Humanities and Social Science, 2(1), pp.62–70.

about human existence, and provokes them to think more critically and creatively." Because video games are a visual medium, aesthetics have an important role in the delivery of humor. They can either be used to tell visual jokes, or prepare the audience for comedic experience. Visual cues, such as overall visual style, character design, and animations can condition the audience to get into a humorous mood. For instance, *Katamari Damacy* (2004)[56], utilizes all of the mentioned enhancers to produce a playable visual gag. The game uses its psychedelic aesthetics to highlight the eccentricity of its story and gameplay. A small glimpse of the visuals is enough to reveal that the game is not to be taken too seriously. The characters have heads shaped like cones and are wrapped in bright-colored spandex suits. The delightful animations and overly simple geometry of the in-game objects contribute to the carnivalistic style. A visual gag is something that that cannot be translated to any other form, and Katamari Damacy is a prime example of that.



Humorous character design of Katamari Damacy: The Prince of All Cosmos (*artist's interpretation*)

Video games share many similarities to animated films, as with both, the directors are by and large responsible for the finished product. The fantastical canvas of games and cartoons makes it possible for the director to portray any imaginable idea.

56 Namco. (2004). Katamari Damacy. Playstation 2.

Tex Avery, a longtime animation director for Warner Bros. in the early 20th century, had an enormous influence on animated comedy. He is responsible for both inventing and institutionalizing a great number of visual gags, that have since become standard visual language in narrative animation. Eyes popping out of the characters' heads when shocked, their jaws falling to the floor in astonishment, and gravity playing tricks on them, are all part of Avery's trademark comedy. Even today, contemporary animations and video games utilize Avery's comedy techniques to make their audiences laugh. Avery knew, that the audience was aware that everything that happened on screen was manufactured, and used the fictitious mold of animation for yet more comedy. Some of his cartoons used black, rotoscoped human silhouettes on top of the actual animation, that were meant to trick the movie audience into believing that somebody had stood up in the theater to chat with the characters of his films. His other films featured a drawn, fluttering hair on screen, as if it was stuck inside the projector. Eventually a character would notice the hair and pull it out. Sometimes the characters of the animations would appear in front of the title cards and read them out loud, or run so fast that they would skid off the edge of the film.[57] By making the format visible, Avery subtly winked at the audience. The 1999 video game *Outcast*[58] features comparable comedic fourth-wall-breaking. The game jests at deficiencies of the electronic medium with a pretend blooper reel with simulated bugs and glitches. The reel shows reactions of the in-game cast as the game's soundtrack is playing too loud during conversations, characters colliding into each other during cutscenes, and the AI malfunctioning in amusing ways. The visual humor of Tex Avery comes from the realization that the animation directors

57 King-Size Comedy: Tex Avery and the Looney Tunes Revolution. (2012). [DVD] Hollywood: Warner Home Video.

58 Infogrames. (1999). Outcast. Windows.

are not bound by the laws of the nature, and have the freedom to do whatever they wish with the format. In a like manner there is still much to be extracted from the freedom that comes with the unique properties of video games.

Tex Avery's heir at Warner Bros., Chuck Jones, distanced himself from the anarchy of the Avery era and emphasized creative discipline in cartoons.[59] Since the possibilities with animations were boundless, Jones established clearly defined systems and rules for his animations (Barrett, 2015)[60]. He found humor in strict conditions and animation systems that benefited the internal consistency of the cartoons. Jones concentrated on the smallest possible gestures and expressions in order to invoke mirth. "If you can't tell what is happening by the way the character moves, you're not really animating," he is quoted saying.[61] For video games, Jones' structural approach is easier to adapt than the boundlessness of Avery's method, because games themselves are closed formal systems. *Super Mario Odyssey* (2017)[62] provides a good example of animations that instantly tell the player what is happening. Mario is able to "capture" various enemies in order to control them. With each creature behaving and controlling in a comically distinct manner, the player gets instant feedback of their abilities. Much of what is humorous about the game is in the visual design, things appearing comical rather than being actual, explicit visual gags.

In video games idle animations are a popular mean to communicate a character's personality and mood to the player. They

59 Jones, C. and Furniss, M. (2005). Chuck Jones: Conversations. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, p.176.

60 Barrett, R. (2015). Chuck Jones' Rules for Writing Road Runner Cartoons. [online] Mentalfloss. Available at: www.mentalfloss.com/article/62035/chuck-jones-rules-writing-road-runner-cartoons [Accessed 6 Mar. 2018].

61 Zhou, T. (2016). Chuck Jones: The Evolution of an Artist. [video] Available at: www.vimeo.com/133693532 [Accessed 6 Mar. 2018].

62 Nintendo. (2017). Super Mario Odyssey. Nintendo Switch.

usually happen when the player does not touch the controls of a game for a fixed amount of time. The other purpose of idle animation is to demonstrate that the world is still in motion despite the lack of a player input. Idle animations in most cases are simple, such as the character glancing around the scenery or scratching their rear-end. They can be used for simple visual gags, like in *Rayman 2: The Great Escape* (2000)[63], where the jointless protagonist takes his blob of a torso and uses it to practice basketball dribbles. In other cases, idle animations have been used in character and world building purposes. One of the earliest examples is in *Leisure Suit Larry in the Land of the Lounge Lizards* (1987)[64]. The game begins on a nightly city street where Larry is waiting for the player interaction. Upon the player not touching the controls, a dog slowly walks into the scene, mistakes the stagnant Larry for a lamppost, and urinates on him.

Sometimes comedy can be elevated by purposefully bad visual design. Terry Gilliam's animation transitions in *Monty Python's Flying Circus*[65] remain a good example of such deliberately shoddy visual style. Furthermore, the animation series *South Park*[66] became famous for having a comparably clumsy approach to cut-out animation. Weinstock (2008: 81–82)[67] argues that a big part of the initial success of South Park is "the tension established between its relatively sophisticated dialogue and involved narratives and its extremely limited animation." In the right hands, sub-par visuals can elevate the humor of a production. Many low-budget games, having realized this, utilize intentionally bad animations and character designs to amuse the player. *Surgeon*

63 Ubisoft. (2000). Rayman 2: The Great Escape. Windows.

64 Sierra On-Line. (1987). Leisure Suit Larry in the Land of the Lounge Lizards. MS-DOS.

65 Monty Python's Flying Circus. (1969–1973). BBC1 (1969–1973) and BBC2 (1974).

66 South Park. 1997. Comedy Central.

67 Weinstock, J. (2008). Taking South Park Seriously. Albany: State University of New York Press. pp.81–82.

Simulator (2013)[68] uses its coarse visual presentation to promote its funny gameplay premise, and to differentiate itself from the more serious simulator games. The game is set in an operation room, but the visual design underscores the farcicality of the player being the surgeon, rather than the vulgarity of the surgical procedure. *Enviro-Bear 2000* (2009)[69] also elevates the comicality of its premise with purposefully cheap-looking visuals. The game tells a story about a bear behind a car wheel on a mission to absorb as much nutrients as it can before winter befalls and hibernation commences. The clunky controls are accompanied by aesthetics that are best described as "Microsoft Paint-inspired." An overly simplified visual style can be funny in itself, but it can also be used to increase emphasis on other funny areas of a given game, and furthermore can lead to heightened self-reflexivity (WEINSTOCK, 2008: 81)[70].

68 Bossa Studios. (2013). Surgeon Simulator. Windows.

69 Captain Games. (2009). Enviro-Bear 2000. Windows.

70 Weinstock, J. (2008). Taking South Park Seriously. Albany: State University of New York Press, p.81.

III

Selected Chronology of Comedic Video Games

In this chapter, three discernible trends in the brief history of comedic video games are closer inspected. The first trend being humorous adventure games, the second being video game parodies, and thirdly, games where humor emergence from their mechanical core.

III.I

The Graphic Adventure

The 1990s are often considered the golden age for scripted video game comedy. One could make an argument that an established comedy genre existed in its infancy during the period. Graphic adventure games marked an era of complex storytelling and lighthearted wordplay. Sierra On-Line and LucasArts are remembered for their humorous games, that focused on entertaining puzzles and amusing dialogue. LucasArts developed *The Secret of Monkey Island* (1990)[71], which followed the success of the 1987 comedy thriller *Maniac Mansion*[72], is considered a hallmark of comedy games. Although the genre is referred as graphic adventure, the humor of The Secret of Monkey Island is verbal in nature. The humorous efforts focus on multiple-choice dialogue trees, which symbolize the thoughts that the main character Guybrush Threepwood, is having. Ron Gilbert, the director and one of the writers of the game emphasizes the comedic significance of the dialogue options: "There were four choices—you only got to choose one of them, but you got to read all four. That was a great source of humor because I could tell four jokes at once. You would laugh at the other three. You might not choose it because it wasn't the one you wanted, but you still got to laugh

71 Lucasfilm Games. (1990). The Secret of Monkey Island. MS-DOS.

72 Lucasfilm Games. (1987). Maniac Mansion. IBM PC.

at the other three jokes. That's a rapid way to build a character's personality, through those dialogue choices." In the closing moments of the game, Guybrush, while watching fireworks in the night sky, proclaims to his love interest, Elaine, to have learned an important lesson from his adventures. The player completes his sentence with one of the following lines:

1. How to deal with frustration, disappointment, and irritating cynicism
2. It's not the size of the ship...
3. Never pay more than 20 bucks for a computer game

In the example above there are only three dialogue options instead of four, but perhaps the fourth and the ultimate joke is that the actual *secret of Monkey Island* is never revealed—or even discussed in the entirety of the game.

LucasArts revisited and improved upon the comedic adventure mold in the subsequent games in the Monkey Island Series, as well as in new intellectual properties, such as *Day of the Tentacle* (1993)[73], *Sam & Max Hit the Road* (1993)[74], *Full Throttle* (1995)[75], and the game that sent the comedic graphic adventure on hiatus, *Grim Fandango* (1998)[76].

Whereas LucasArts focused on developing original comedic productions, Sierra On-Line iterated on their existing franchises. The company's video game catalogue is not exclusively funny, but series such as *Leisure Suit Larry* (1987–)[77] and *Space Quest* (1986–)[78] are

73 LucasArts. (1993). Day of the Tentacle. MS-DOS.

74 LucasArts. (1993). Sam & Max Hit the Road. MS-DOS.

75 LucasArts. (1995). Full Throttle. Windows.

76 LucasArts. (1998). Grim Fandango. Windows.

77 Sierra On-Line. (1987–). [series] Leisure Suit Larry.

78 Sierra On-Line. (1986–). [series] Space Quest.

unmistakable comedies. Leisure Suit Larry, introduced to the world in 1987, is one of Sierra's most popular series. The games follow the endeavors of an aspiring lady-killer Larry Laffer on his everlasting search of a hook up. Larry's persona is clearly designed to be relatable for the game's target audience, teenage boys, Larry being a middle-aged computer programmer going through puberty alarmingly late while still living with his parents. The humor is harmonious with the game's lustful tones. A lot of the jokes and objectives are suggestive, even crude. Although the Larry games have not aged particularly well, they were a major landmark in the evolution of video games. Leisure Suit Larry in the Land of the Lounge Lizards[79] is said to be the first game to be set in real world environments and feature true-to-life people as characters in a present day setting[80], which was a departure for the medieval and space backdrops of other games at the time.

After the success of adventure games dwindled, the once nascent comedy genre seemed to have died out. Totilo (2004)[81] recounts the events at dusk of the old millennium: "Improving technology led to story and dialogue getting pushed aside in favor of advanced graphics, physics, and immersive action. With those priorities, it was only natural that programmers focused less on punch lines than on the trajectory of a forward pass and the sound of a bullet." Al Lowe, the creator of Leisure Suit Larry, mourns the lost momentum of comedy games: "I thought we had a handle on [*humor*] at some point [...] But when the adventure game format passed away, and other formats became more popular, humor seemed to be left by the wayside" (MACKEY, 2009)[82].

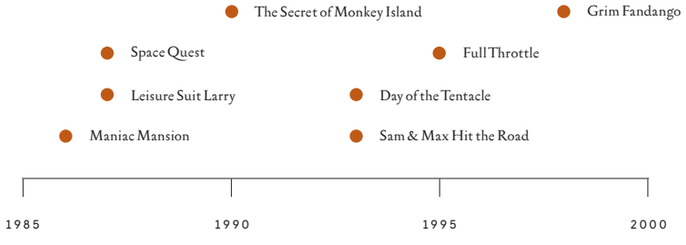
79 Sierra On-Line. (1987) Leisure Suit Larry in the Land of the Lounge Lizards. MS-DOS.

80 Rise of the Video Game. (2007). [Documentary] USA: Discovery Channel.

81 Totilo, S. (2004). Why aren't video games funny?. [online] Slate Magazine. Available at: www.slate.com/articles/technology/gaming/2004/11/joystuck.html [Accessed 6 Mar. 2018].

82 Mackey, B. (2009). No Laughing Matter: Making Humor Work in Games. [online] Gamasutra. Available at: www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/132586/no_laughing_matter_making_humor_.php [Accessed 25 Aug. 2017].

The focus shifted to games that perhaps justifiably prioritized action over contemplation—an activity that was at the core of adventure games. The fall of adventure games was due to the genre's own inability to adapt to the times. Young (2010)[83] insists that the verbs that define the gameplay in adventure games, such as "walk," "look at," "pick up," and "talk to," are the same that describe the activity of going to a garage sale. The genre had gotten stuck in the past. Young argues that action games, that had become increasingly popular, had more "adventure" in them than the self-entitled adventure games.



III.II

Parody

Parody could be described as a parasite that cannot live without its host. It is dependent on the authoritative status of its role model, but instead of just mimicking, parodies aim to create new meanings and rewrite power structures. Early video game parodies took inspiration from outside of the field of gaming, but as games started to gain mainstream popularity, and as enough

83 Young, S. (2010). The Rise, Fall and Rise of Adventure Games. [online] The Escapist. Available at: www.escapistmagazine.com/articles/view/video-games/columns/experienced-points/8016-The-Rise-Fall-and-Rise-of-Adventure-Games [Accessed 23 Aug. 2017].

established conventions were in place, they slowly started to satirize one another.

The 1990s featured numerous video games that starred sarcastic, anthropomorphic animal mascots. Sam & Max Hit the Road[84] is a game about a dog, Sam, and his rabbit aide, Max, as a detective duo. The game—looking and sounding like a Saturday morning cartoon—is often praised for its clever sense of humor and parodic take on buddy cop comedies. Majority of animal mascots found their home in platform games, rather than in graphic adventures.

Gex (1995)[85] was a pioneer in the quirky platformer sub-genre. The creators Crystal Dynamics even recruited the famous comedian, Dana Gould, to write and perform the monologue for the main character Gex the gecko, but his repetitive rapid-fire one-liners were greeted with ire, rather than delight.[86] Although falling short with the comedy, Gex had the right idea of having actual funny people being responsible for the comedic material. The game paved the way for other games, such as *Conker's Bad Fur Day* (2001)[87] to improve on its mishaps. The game's lead, Conker, is a blue-eyed squirrel with deceivingly cutesy looks. Underneath the orange fur, lies a greedy, binge-drinking scoundrel. Conker's Bad Fur Day shares kinship to *South Park*[88] and *Beavis & Butt-Head*[89], with the shared dissonance in the art style and the content. The squirrel's idle animations include various dubious acts, such as drinking cans of beer and browsing pornographic magazines.

84 LucasArts. (1993). Sam & Max Hit the Road. MS-DOS.

85 Crystal Dynamics. (1993). Gex. 3DO.

86 Fahey, M. (2012). Not-So-Great Moments in Video Game Humor: How Much Dana Gould is Too Much?. [online] Kotaku. Available at: kotaku.com/5900369/not-so-great-moments-in-video-game-humor-how-much-dana-gould-is-too-much [Accessed 14 Sep. 2017].

87 Rare. (2001). Conker's Bad Fur Day. Nintendo 64.

88 South Park. 1997. Comedy Central.

89 Beavis and Butt-Head. (1993). MTV.

Bad Fury Day uses many movies, such as *Matrix*[90], *Terminator*[91] and *Alien*[92] as source material for its parody, but occasionally takes jibes at video games as well. Late on in the game, the player is tricked into believing that they have encountered a game breaking glitch when an in-game cutscene freezes without a warning. The lock-up is revealed to be a Tex Avery-esque gag, as Conker starts moving again and enquires help from the real world programmers. Conker's Bad Fur Day is recurrently brought up when comedic video games are discussed, as it successfully parodies the exceedingly pleasant 3D-platformers of the late 90's.

The case of *Duke Nukem 3D* (1996)[93] is a curious one. On one hand the game effectively parodies pop culture of the 1990s and satirizes the cult of masculinity in Hollywood's action movies, but on the other hand it is notoriously tone deaf to its own reality distortion. Due to the unapologetic sexism and jokes that are verbatim plagiarized from other forms of entertainment[94], the game's reputation has been tarnished in the course of time. Davis, as interviewed by Gonzales and Smith (2004)[95], summarizes the character of Duke Nukem as an impersonation of a prototypical action hero who ultimately became his own archetype. The post-ironic consequence for the game's success was that its protagonist became the default template for many games in the genre of first-person shooters. Sterling (2011)[96] questions the Duke

90 Matrix. (1999). [film] Directed by The Wachowski Brothers. USA: Village Roadshow Pictures.

91 Terminator. (1984). [film] Directed by Cameron, J. USA: Carolco Pictures.

92 Alien. (1979). [film] Directed by Scott, R. USA: 20th Century Fox.

93 GT Interactive. (1996). Duke Nukem 3D. MS-DOS.

94 Sterling, J. (2011). The Duke Delusion: Why Duke Nukem isn't a parody. [online] Destructoid. Available at: www.destructoid.com/the-duke-delusion-why-duke-nukem-isn-t-a-parody-203745.phtml [Accessed 11 Jan. 2018].

95 Gonzalez, L. and Smith, M. (2004). A Brief History of Video Game Humor. [online] GameSpot. Available at: www.gamespot.com/articles/a-brief-history-of-video-game-humor/1100-6114407 [Accessed 22 Aug. 2017].

96 Sterling, J. (2011). The Duke Delusion: Why Duke Nukem Isn't a Parody. [online] Destructoid. Available at: destructoid.com/the-duke-delusion-why-duke-nukem-isn-t-a-parody-203745.phtml [Accessed 11 Jan. 2018].

Nukem 3D's parodic merits, proclaiming that the game created more problems than it highlighted and mocked at. Gonzalez and Smith contend that the humor fell flat for many because Duke proactively tried to tell the audience what is funny, but his forced efforts ended up clashing with the audience's humorous sensibilities. Developer Croteam recognized Duke Nukem's authoritative status with *Serious Sam: The First Encounter* (2001)[97]. Serious Sam parodies Duke Nukem 3D, the game that was originally intended as a parody. The game exaggerates every stereotypical aspect portrayed by its source material, by making everything bigger, louder, and jokier. Nevertheless, with their identical looks, foul mouths, and casual attitudes to violence, Serious Sam and Duke Nukem were essentially the same character. Due to the game's uncritical position, Serious Sam fails in challenging Duke Nukem 3D's representations, and instead ends up reinforcing its world view—making Serious Sam more of a pastiche than a parody.

Every so often parodying has been used as a smoke screen to benefit from the success of the original work. One of the most mimicked game series, Rockstar Games' *Grand Theft Auto*[98], has given birth to a sub-genre, often referred as "GTA clone."[99] Common denominators of the genre are an open explorable city as a setting, access to various vehicles and weapons, and a story that revolves around organized crime. *Saints Row* (2006)[100] and its sequels meet and exceed the parameters of a GTA Clone. The Saints Row games rely heavily on parody to avoid unfavorable comparisons to GTA. Both series' examine the real world through a satirical lens, but it is Saints Row that amplifies the

97 Gathering of Developers. (2001). Serious Sam: The First Encounter. Windows.

98 Rockstar Games. (1997–). [series] Grand Theft Auto.

99 Reparaz, M. (2007). Battle of the GTA Clones. [online] Gamesradar. Available at: www.gamesradar.com/battle-of-the-gta-clones [Accessed 8 Sep. 2017].

100 THQ. (2006). Saints Row. Xbox 360.

ridiculousness to new heights. With a repertoire of ludicrous costumes, silly weapons and over-the-top set pieces, the humor of GTA seems subtle in comparison to the self-aware stupidity of Saints Row. Herndon (2015)[101] applauds the irreverence of Saints Row games for exhibiting the dark side of humanity and being alright with it: "That's what makes Saints Row great. It doesn't care." The series has since developed a personality of its own by moving further from GTA games with each consecutive sequel, with other popular games such as *Metal Gear Solid* (1998)[102] and *Mass Effect* (2007)[103] having their share of the ridicule.

Doom (2016)[104] is a play on the shooter genre conventions, and a realization that there is nothing more comical than self-imposed seriousness. The rowdiness and apparent lack of intellectual depth depict the game as just another gritty shooter, but Doom is a parody in disguise. Being a reboot of the standard-setting 1993 first-person shooter of the same name, the premise of Doom is as clichéd as it is straightforward. The plot is a reimagining of an age-old video game story where demons ravage around metal corridors in a facility run by evil scientists. The backstory involves the gates of Hell being opened as a result of cataclysmic experiments having gone horribly wrong. The game is perfectly aware of how little the audience cares about the story of Doom to begin with, and has fun with the liberating comedic potency that comes with the presumption. A soft computational voice repeats warning messages about demonic presence being at unsafe levels in the facility, while other prerecorded messages encourage employees to perform better than God by not resting

101 Herndon, N. (2015). GTA Vs. Saint's Row: A Battle Of Satire. [online] Forbes. Available at: www.forbes.com/sites/archenemy/2015/05/19/gta-vs-saints-row-a-battle-of-satire/#19c62a6b620d [Accessed 11 Sep. 2017].

102 Konami. (1998). Metal Gear Solid. PlayStation.

103 Electronic Arts and Microsoft Game Studios. (2007). Mass Effect. Xbox 360.

104 Bethesda Softworks. (2016). Doom. Windows.

on the seventh day of the week. The game's co-director Marty Stratton describes (PECKHAM, 2016)[105] the the development team's ambition to make every facet in Doom nothing short of ridiculous: "Even with the violence, we tend to say 'How do we make it laugh out loud fun?' And we've tried to infuse that in every aspect of what we've done." Not even death is taken too seriously. When the player falls into a pond of lava, the playable character—while slowly drowning into the substance—is shown giving the player a thumbs-up, replicating the famous scene from the movie *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*.[106]

Doom's unnamed main character is an assumed psychological projection of the player's profile. His behavior reflects what the developers think the player is feeling during gameplay. In story sequences where the player is forced to stay still, the protagonist makes his impatience evident by smashing control panels and monitors around him. He is an embodiment of the the itch for action that the player experiences. Doom converts the trope of the silent protagonist into the restless protagonist. The protagonist is given a personality and a purpose within the world. Shoemaker (2016)[107] endorses the twist in the silent protagonist schtick: "This game takes the original irrelevant video game protagonist, a nameless nobody so generic he's only ever been referred to as 'Doomguy,' and reimagines him as nothing less than a divine avenger so unstoppable that over the course of two games he left a Biblical mythology in his wake." Violence is not just the only option for the Doomguy, but an answer to all of his problems. When his forward march is momentarily halted by a door requiring a palm scan, Doomguy locates a corpse, tears

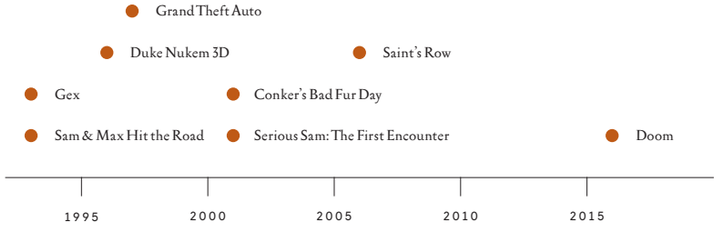
105 Peckham, M. (2016). Everything To Know About the New 'Doom' Game. [online] Time. Available at: www.time.com/4325961/doom-interview [Accessed 6 Mar. 2018].

106 Terminator 2: Judgment Day. (1991). [film] Directed by Cameron, J. USA: Carolco Pictures.

107 Shoemaker, B. (2016). Doom Review. [online] Giant Bomb. Available at: www.giantbomb.com/reviews/doom-review/1900-745 [Accessed 6 Mar. 2018].

off its arm and scans the palm without batting an eye. The enemy becomes seemingly afraid of the "Doomslayer," as he is referred to throughout the game. In the world of Doom it is the humans who are exploiting Hell for its resources, and not the other way around, the punchline being that humans remain even more vicious than demons.

The parodic roots of Doom are in other video games, rather than in films or TV series. The "gritty shooter" genre, that had become increasingly popular in the 21st century, is used as source material for the comedy. Games such as *Gears of War* (2006)[108], *Killzone* (2004)[109], and *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (2007)[110], that adopted visual language from the war coverage in news outlets[111], marked an era for tonally deaf games where solemnity was their one note. Doom can be seen as satirical commentary of these games, but also of the games industry that became engrossed with the preposition that gritty is a synonym for mature.



108 Microsoft Studios. (2006). Gears of War. Xbox 360.

109 Sony Interactive Entertainment. (2004). Killzone. PlayStation 2.

110 Activision. (2007). Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare. Xbox 360.

111 Shepard, S. (2017). How 'Vanquish' Subverts the Military Shooter. [online] Waypoint. Available at: waypoint.vice.com/en_us/article/newajb/how-vanquish-subverts-the-military-shooter [Accessed 5 Sep. 2017].

III.III

Player, the Comedian

Early physics engines and tools that allowed the player to interact with environments proved to be a winning formula for mayhem. Developers started experimenting with gameplay that endorsed humorous encounters instead of pre-scripted scenarios. *Worms* (1995)[112] and its sequels put players dueling in a turn based artillery game against each other. In Worms each player takes control of a team full of militant earthworms drilling tunnels and setting traps in an attempt to overcome each other. Each game begins with a humorous cutscene in the style of classic Warner Bros. cartoons, but the real comedy happens during gameplay. The worms blast at each other with hilariously overpowered weapons, such as airstrikes, bazookas, and miniguns. Furthermore, Worms features even more preposterous weaponry, including banana bombs, exploding sheep—and the last resort, a kamikaze attack. The sequels amplified the comedy with even more goofy weapons, such as gas-emitting Skunks, Whoopsie Cushions, Black Holes, Mad Cows, Ming Vases, and Fridge Launchers. With the rise of emergent comedy, players became an active part of the comedy-making.

Clumsy and artificially stupid virtual characters clashing with a naturalistic game world is a mold for contemporary video comedy. Games like *The Sims* (2000)[113] merged game systems with artificial intelligence to generate surprises in moment-to-moment gameplay. Life becomes a playground for social experimentations, since in the virtual world of The Sims actions

112 Ocean Software. (1995). Worms. MS-DOS.

113 Electronic Arts. (2000). The Sims. Windows.

do not have heavy consequences. There is no overarching plot but there is drama comparable to soap operas. The Sims are grownups incapable of taking care of themselves and the player's role is to be their micromanaging life coach. The comedic achievements of The Sims are further explored in chapter VII.

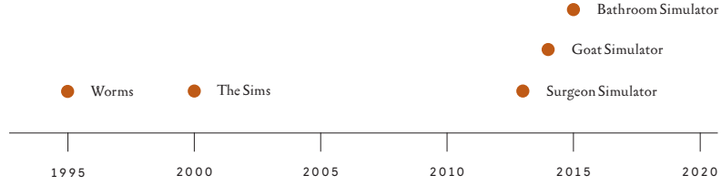
As graphics and physics engines improved, people started sharing their comedic video game content on internet's various streaming services. Player-narrated gameplay videos have gained popularity due to their comedic undertones. Švelch (2014: 2530–2552)[114], having analyzed humorous gameplay videos for games that feature malfunctioning physics and collision detection algorithms, comes into the conclusion that the comedy in these kinds of games is dominantly either incongruous, coincidental, slapsticky, or nonsensical in nature. Comedic gameplay videos could be likened to such television shows where people submit their homemade videos that feature unintentional physical comedy.

The rise of the indie game, that was the result of rapidly growing development costs and increasing popularity of digital distribution platforms in the mid 2000s, was a resurgence for comedic games. The indie game brought something essential to video game comedy that was previously missing, more concise development team sizes. Parker (2011)[115] describes the indie scene being about "self-sustainability and creative control." Comedy is more impactful when it does not overstay its welcome, and the smaller scope of many indie games proved to be the ideal form for ludonarrative comedy. The concise games were also streaming-friendly due to their easily consumable size. Nichiporchik

114 Švelch, J. (2014). Comedy of Contingency: Making Physical Humor in Video Game Spaces. International Journal of Communication, (8), pp.2530–2552.

115 Parker, L. (2011). The Rise of the Indie Developer. [online] GameSpot. Available at: www.gamespot.com/articles/the-rise-of-the-indie-developer/1100-6298425 [Accessed 12 Jan. 2018].

(Orland, 2015)[116] defines that an ideal streaming-friendly game is easy to comprehend for the streamer and the audience alike, in addition to having sufficient replay value. The popularity of streaming services gave rise to games that seemed to be designed especially with streamers in mind. Comedic indie games hijacked the term "simulator." that once typified a group of games attempting to simulate a variety of real world activities. The new, parodic simulator genre ridicules niche games, such as *Euro Truck Simulator* (2008)[117] or *Warehouse and Logistics Simulator* (2014)[118], that are unable to see humor in their own titles. The new ironic simulator genre lovingly mocks the obscurity of the genre, with titles such as *Goat Simulator* (2014)[119], *Surgeon Simulator* (2013)[120] and *Bathroom Simulator* (2015)[121]. The close focus and the lack of conflict of the non-comedic simulators are assigned to a new humorous context with the ironic simulator genre.



116 Orland, K. (2015). Twitch Plays Everything: How Livestreaming is Changing Game Design. [online] Ars Technica. Available at: arstechnica.com/gaming/2015/10/twitch-plays-everything-how-livestreaming-is-changing-game-design [Accessed 12 Jan. 2018].

117 SCS Software. (2008). Euro Truck Simulator. Windows.

118 United Independent Entertainment GmbH. (2014). Warehouse and Logistics Simulator. Windows.

119 Coffee Stain Studios. (2014). Goat Simulator. Windows.

120 Bossa Studios. (2013). Surgeon Simulator. Windows.

121 Elias Games. (2015). Bathroom Simulator. Windows.

IV

The Two Schools of Ludonarrative Comedy

The question of who conducts the comedy in video game spaces is what defines the types of ludonarrative comedy. Salen and Zimmerman (2003: 376–420)[122] divide video game narratives into two types, *embedded* and *emergent* narratives. Embedded narrative is all the information the game wants to transmit to the player, whereas emergent narrative arises from the player interacting with the rules and the mechanics of the game. The two narrative structures overlap and are not always easily distinguishable as two different narrative experiences. Players experience an interactive story crafted for them but also create their own personal narratives by engaging with the game world. Game designers have dominion over embedded narrative but only indirect control over emergent narrative. The designers set the parameters of the world and the functioning gameplay systems, but can never predict the exact motions of the player.

Cook (2012)[123] identifies similar patterns in ludonarrative comedy. He postulates that game designers approach video game comedy in similarly distinct ways. The first being a traditional approach in which comedy is executed in traditional means of storytelling, including humorous writing, comedic scenarios, and visual jokes. According to Cook, this style of comedy is emulated from other forms of entertainment, and therefore it is easily identifiable for modern audiences. The second approach, humor-through-mechanics, is unique to the interactive entertainment. The method involves the player as part of the comedy-making by establishing gameplay mechanics or activities designed to cause comical conflicts. Cook maintains that because gameplay mechanics are capable of generating nearly endless number of unique comedic situations,

122 Salen, K., Zimmerman, E. (2003). Rules of Play. Massachusetts: The MIT Press. pp.376–420.

123 Cook, D. (2012). Opinion: A Theory About Humor in Games. [online] Gamasutra. Available at: www.gamasutra.com/view/news/39433/Opinion_A_Theory_About_Humor_In_Games.php [Accessed 28 Sep. 2017].

such emergent comedy can result in "evergreen humor." The two schools emphasize different aspects of the comedic premise. *Humor-through-game-mechanics* empowers the player as the comedian, whereas *humor-through-storytelling* exposes players to specific and pre-defined humorous ideas. Although emergent comedy is unique to the medium, the more finely tuned comedic plot lines and concepts demand auteurism that only humor-through-storytelling can provide. Comedy is curation of ideas. It is about setting a framework and broadcasting a humorous point of view to the audience. When the responsibility to produce humor is on the player, comedy becomes coincidental instead of being methodical.

The third type of ludonarrative comedy, unintentional comedy, is one without a clear agency. As the focus of this thesis is in deliberate comedy, accidental comedy is only briefly discussed here. This type of humor is found in the corruption of the game itself, in the form of bugs and glitches. They represents, what Knox (1951: 543)[124] regards as the essence in all humor, "playful chaos in a serious world." Glitches can be infuriating when they hinder or halt the player's progress, but their incongruousness can also cause unexpected mirth. Because unintentional comedy is a surprise for both, the player and the game designer alike, it is one of the clearer examples of incongruous humor in video games. Incongruity theory considers laughter as an affect that arises from the friction of two or more contrasting concepts. The *bisociation*, as Koestler (1964: 91–95)[125] calls it, is a result of a shock effect that occurs when the two incompatible matrices conflict with the mind's expected thought patterns and create a comic effect.

A game's incompetence to perform tasks—malfunctioning physics engine or outlandishly twitching animations—can turn

124 Knox, I. (1951). Towards a Philosophy of Humor. Journal of Philosophy, 48, pp.541–548.

125 Koestler, A. (1989). The Act of Creation. London, UK: Arkana and Morreall, J. (2009). Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

a serious game into a work of accidental comedy. Švelch (2014: 2530–2552)[126] suggests that games that strive to represent real life but end up failing, may become a subject of ridicule. Unintentional comedy comes with a price of taking the player away from the intended experience, which is why games seldom wish to be the subject of ironic laughter. Video game bugs and glitches have become a branch of internet's meme culture. Youtube, and internet's many gaming message boards are filled with videos and animated GIFs that target broken games for their unintended comedic value. When the sincere will to accomplish turns into a vulgar failure, accidental comedy can be considered to be in the style of camp humor. "It [camp humor] is a passionate failure and there is beauty in that," Quinn (2015)[127] recounts.

IV.I

Embedded Comedy

Embedded comedy stands for the schemed, pre-planned humorous occurrences in a game. It is best understood as a classical way of doing comedy, in which the comedian is responsible for the amusement. The form is adapted from literature and cinema, where the beholder is on a carefully prepared journey. Embedded comedy is part of the game's overall narrative. It commonly evinces through cutscenes, dialogue and scripted sequences of the game, but also how the player is treated by the surrounding world and the non-playable characters. From the player's viewpoint there is little room for improvisation because the game is in control of the comic delivery. The approach complies with

126 Švelch, J. (2014). Comedy of Contingency: Making Physical Humor in Video Game Spaces. International Journal of Communication, (8), pp.2530–2552.

127 Quinn, Z. (2015). Comedy Games: An Underexplored Genre. Available at: www.gdcvault.com/play/1021867/Comedy-Games-An-Underexplored [Accessed 1 Jun. 2017].

Vorhaus's view (1994: p.19)[128], that a comic premise requires a point of view. As the role of the player is more passive than in games where comedy hinges—not only on their actions—but upon their comedic sensibilities, the game can set up refined comedic scenarios and can generally be more expressive.

The Grand Theft Auto games establish their humorous, satirical world with help from various audiovisual cues. David Annandale, referring specifically to *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (2004)[129], describes its world as "carnivalistic" (GARRELTS, 2006: 88–104)[130]. The player's daily existence is filled with satire and parody. They are included in the game's many radio shows, advertising signs and fictitious brands. Annandale explains how even the pedestrian conversations the player overhears during the gameplay add to the "carnivalesque spirit" of the game Upon crossing paths, the pedestrians engage in brief conversations but never seem to listen what the other person is saying. The conversations become surreal as both of the participants are sticking to their topics of obsession without reacting appropriately to the other person.

GTA games sustain an illusion of a humorous world that operates by its own rules. Because humor is not just limited to a single section of the game—but covers nearly every aspects of it—singular jokes can be fragmented and spread throughout the world. An amusing product a player might hear getting promoted in a car radio may also be sighted in outdoor advertising, or heard talked about in the streets. The fragmentation, repetition and alteration of comedic concepts contribute to a coherent humorous world.

In many cases, games utilize embedded comedy techniques

128 Vorhaus, J. (1994). The Comic Toolbox: How to Be Funny Even If You're Not. Beverly Hills, California: Silman-James Press.

129 Rockstar Games. (2004). Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas. PlayStation 2.

130 Garrelts, N. (2006). The Meaning and Culture of Grand Theft Auto. Jefferson, N.C. [u.a.]: McFarland & Company. pp.88–104.

without fully committing to comedy. Dormannn and Biddle (2009: 806–810)[131] divide the use of humor in video games to it either being part of the game's overall design, or simply adding flavor to gameplay. When used more infrequently, the surprise factor of humor increases. *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (2017)[132] is set in a war-weary world, but the game's tone remains optimistic as humor is used to cut through the melancholy of its storyline. Humor is manifested through the habitants of Hyrule—the game's fictional kingdom—that has been oppressed by a malevolent force. Their light-heartedness is the token of hope that the characters sustain in spite of the bleak circumstances. Breath of the Wild uses its cast of characters to make the player see its world from a different perspective. Dille and Platten (2007: 55–58)[133] call the approach "nodal storytelling," and explain that the autonomous little tales, such as the ones in Breath of the Wild, all constitute to a larger system that is the main plot. Each node has its own dramatic arc. They are self-contained pieces that each convey an intimate outlook of the larger scheme that is being unveiled slowly. With Breath of the Wild, the payoff for completing tasks for the game's characters is usually an item, insight about the world, or simply a funny piece of dialogue. Upon helping a character named *Sesami* to rescue and reassemble a group of lost friends, the player is rewarded with the following humorous exchange:

> SESAMI I'm kind of glad all of this happened. It has helped me to realize just how important friendship is. Opening up to others might make you vulnerable, but it's also the only way to give your life any value.

131 Dormann, C. and Biddle, R. (2009). A Review of Humor for Computer Games: Play, Laugh and More. Simulation & Gaming, 40(6), pp.806–810.

132 Nintendo. (2017). The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild. Nintendo Switch.

133 Dille, F. and Platten, J. (2007). The Ultimate Guide to Video Game Writing and Design. 3rd ed. New York: Watson-Guptill Publications. pp.55–58.

SESAMI That said, caring for others is an emotional liability, so my friends and I have decided to part ways.

SESAMI Not really sure what the takeaway is here.

Small comedic occurrences, such as Breath of the Wild's character interactions, grant the player a break from the over-arching dramatic turmoil. Comedy is used to reduce the sense of urgency and make the player enjoy their time in the world.

IV.1.1
THE PROBLEM OF INTERACTIVE COMIC TIMING

Because the player has freedom of choice and freedom in movement, embedded comedy is not without its problems. Embedded video game comedy creates a timing problem, as the element of interaction interferes with the rhythm of the humor. Timing is a crucial element in all comedy. It dictates the rhythm and the pacing of a joke, thus generating a comic effect. In movies, books and in other non-interactive media, the author is in control of the pacing and therefore, the timing of the jokes. In video games, however, the game designers have to accept that there are parts that are not in their control. Porter (2015)[134] explains the conundrum in practical terms: "If the player is looking somewhere else while the joke happens, there's not really any point in having the joke." Porter makes a division in two ways jokes can be implemented in games: either spread them into the game world and let the players discover them on their own; or place them into a cutscene where the players cannot miss them. The latter is often the preferred option as it follows the established

134 Porter, M. (2015). Why Is It So Hard to Make a Funny Video Game?. [online] Vice. Available at: www.vice.com/en_us/article/5gk8e8/2014-was-a-vintage-year-for-funny-video-games-889 [Accessed 7 Mar. 2018].

conventions of how jokes and gags are delivered in other media. However, reducing the level of interaction is not exactly same as solving the problem.

If comedy is a gust of wind, then comic timing is the exact moment it is felt by the observer.

Player agency is at the core of the comic timing problem. When the player decides not to act according to the game's intended ways, comedy is jeopardized. Once the timing is compromised, it cannot be salvaged. Comedy is about momentum. If the player is not aware, or simply does not care that the game is setting up a joke, humor has failed even before it has been performed. Furthermore, if a joke is divided into parts and delivered in different locations in the game world, there is a risk that the player will miss either the set-up or the punchline, rendering the whole effort obsolete. Fernández-Vara (2009, 211–213)[135] speculates that invisible constraints, like a closely curated script, can make the interactor become aware of the limits of the simulation, resulting them to limit their own actions. To clarify, the timing problem is not the player's fault. In order to deliver humor successfully, a game has to be able to predict and funnel the behavior of its players at any given moment.

South Park: The Stick of Truth (2014)[136] has a unique solution to the comic timing problem. The Stick of Truth converts the popular television show into an elaborate roleplaying game, but

135 Fernández-Vara, C. (2009). The Tribulations of Adventure Games: Integrating Story into Simulation through Performance. Doctoral Dissertation. Georgia Institute of Technology. pp.211–213

136 Ubisoft. (2014). South Park: The Stick of Truth. PlayStation 3.

when it comes to humor, the game keeps matters delightfully single-layered. True to the show's heritage, The Stick of Truth finds humor in flatulence. The game features a dedicated button for farting, that will make the playable character squeeze out an amusing trumpet sound. The button prompt could be seen as humor enforced through game mechanics, if it were not for the way the game treats farts as set-ups, as opposed to punchlines. In comedy farts are habitually used as the be-all and end-all method to accomplish comic relief, but when the act is tied to a button press, the surprise factor is diluted. Instead, the joke here is how the quiet mountain town reacts to the player-triggered flatulence. Upon farting in proximity of the townsfolk, they each respond with unique lines of dialogue: "Ew, I can taste it," screams the little girl in a school yard; "This is not the good kind of torture," utters the goth kid; "That's just like our dark roast," announces the coffeehouse owner with a smile. If there is no one in visible sight, the player may hear the character Eric Cartman's echoing laughter in the distance. Although the player is involved in the comedy-making, they are not empowered as the comedian. They are the ones simply responding "who's there" to the knock-knock joke of the game.

Whereas emergent comedy is about immediacy, embedded comedy flourishes when comedic scenarios are properly set up. The Secret of Monkey Island rewards the audience's attention by foreshadowing comedic bits early on in the game, and concluding them only at a much later stage. When the game's lead character Guybrush Threepwood is inquired about any special abilities that would help him in his journey to become a pirate, he responds by being able to hold his breath for ten minutes. What seems like a silly throwaway line is actually a set-up for a joke concluded later on in the game. After a series of unfortunate events, Guybrush finds himself at the ocean floor tied to a stone idol. Should the player decide to stay idle for more than ten minutes, Guybrush will drown and the game will end.

In a similar fashion, The Stick of Truth plays the long game with its flatulence humor. Squeezing farts is not purely a fun pastime for the player. It is central to the game's plot. The Stick of Truth considers farts as magic spells that can be used in combat, similar to how magic is used in other fantasy roleplaying games. The game even features tutorials, which instruct the player about the ways flatulence can be used in combat. The spells range from basic force attacks to fiery explosions, and the opponents hit by the magic attack get inflicted with a *grossed out* status effect. The main character's unique ability to be a one man horn section is more than just a silly gameplay mechanic, as his digestive issues are revealed to be a major turning point in the plot. This makes every player-induced fart a clever, unhurried way of showing character development. The Stick of Truth is constructed like a prolonged South Park episode, which means that it treats its juvenile jokes and themes with admirable earnestness. As what is central to the plot can be condensed to a single button press, it is fair to conclude the game being much more than just the sum of its farts.

IV.II

Emergent Comedy

When player agency is the catalyst for mirth, ludonarrative comedy can be considered emergent. Player-generated comedy invokes the player's own comedic tendencies by promoting creativity and freedom (GRÖNROOS: 2012: 62)[137]. As gameplay is the defining aspect of any game, scheming comedy around it is

137 Grönroos, A. (2013). Humour in Video Games: Play, Comedy, and Mischief. Master. Aalto University School of Art, Design and Architecture, p. 62.

only logical. Cook (2012)[138], while appreciating the triumphs of comedic adventure games, such as The Secret of Monkey Island, challenges more games to integrate comedy straight into the gameplay, to make play less disposable. Furthermore, Koster (2013: 64)[139] contends that some actions suit the medium better than others. "They [video games] do very well at active verbs: controlling, projecting, surrounding, matching, remembering, counting, and so on." Players coming into video games, presumably expect interactivity rather than passive monitoring. When a game does not include the player as an active part of comedy-making, the interactivity that shapes the medium hinders.

Emergent humor is about the players' having fun with the game, them making fun of the game, or other players playing the game. Dormann and Biddle (2009: 809)[140] point out that comedy in video games usually takes the form of either slapstick or nonsense. Švelch (2014: 25–30)[141] also acknowledges that video games are an ideal platform for physical comedy, stating that their ability of generating "unexpected coincidences, collisions, and nonsensical situations" can be utilized for a comical effect. Švelch praises the misbehaving physics, and collision detection algorithms as holding plenty of comedic potential. The numerous humorous gameplay videos on the internet's video-sharing websites prove that there exists a section of players who love expressing themselves comedically. People love to think of themselves as funny. In fact, studies have shown that 94% of people tend to think their

138 Cook, D. (2012). Opinion: A Theory about Humor in Games. [online] Gamasutra. Available at: www.gamasutra.com/view/news/39433/Opinion_A_Theory_About_Humor_In_Games.php [Accessed 28 Sep. 2017].

139 Koster, R. (2013). A Theory of Fun for Game Design. 2nd ed. Sebastopol, California: O'Reilly Media, p.64.

140 Dormann, C. and Biddle, R. (2009). A Review of Humor for Computer Games: Play, Laugh and More. Simulation & Gaming, 40(6), p.809.

141 Švelch, J. (2014). Comedy of Contingency: Making Physical Humor in Video Game Spaces. International Journal of Communication, (8), p.2530.

sense of humor is either average or above average.[142] The market for comedy involving the audience seems exist. The category of emergent ludonarrative comedy raises an interesting philosophical question, and a possible topic for further research: who in fact is the performer of the comedy—the player who goes through the path laid out for them by the game designers, or the game designers who provide the player the platform and the tools?

Often the emergent funny moments in video game originate from either the game or the player behaving in a disorderly manner. Malaby (2007: 105–109)[143] acknowledges that games are fundamentally about disorder, being "carefully calibrated to generate contingent outcomes." Malaby recognizes that games have capability to create meaning, but urges that there is unpredictability in the interpretation of the outcomes. The resulting contingency that also characterizes comedy, will in the course of time generate incongruous humorous outcomes. Of these situations, however, the developers are not directly in control. Švelch (2014: 2543)[144] remarks that the player's role in the interactive comedy-making is to informedly poke at the game engine.

IV.II.I
THE RULE IS TO BREAK

A portion of players will always attempt to bend the rules of a game, exploit its loopholes, and look for ways to break the prepared experience. Salen and Zimmerman (2003: 266–285)[145] regard

142 Lefcourt, H. and Martin, R. (1986). Humor and Life Stress. New York, New York: Springer New York, p.17.

143 Malaby, T. (2007). Beyond Beyond Play: A New Approach to Games. Games and Culture, 2(2), pp.95–113.

144 Švelch, J. (2014). Comedy of Contingency: Making Physical Humor in Video Game Spaces. International Journal of Communication, (8), p.2543.

145 Salen, K., Zimmerman, E. (2003). Rules of Play. Massachusetts: The MIT Press. pp.266–285.

attempts of rule-breaking as systematic attribute in games, something that will eventually happen when player agency is involved. Norms and rules—either social or legislative—are also a breeding ground for humor, as well as a frequent source for material for many comedians. Emergent comedy also flourishes when it is used to subvert the rules and norms of a game. The players' behavior should never be taken for granted, Salen and Zimmerman stress that game designers should accept rule-breaking being simply one of the many ways to play a game. Rules should be established, but it should also be acknowledged that players will likely attempt to break them. Rules are normative propositions[146] that correspond to an existing evaluative standard. Thus, they can also be used as a tool to evaluate the player's behavior and actions. When a rule is established as normal, its violation equals abnormality. Strict rules lead to binary choices: a move is either allowed or it is strictly forbidden. When the rules are flexible, the "what if's," that encourage creativity, come into play.

Humor is not obedient to normal social codes (HIETALAHTI, 2016: 29)[147]. Establishing rules and norms within a humorous world is crucial, as humor based on disobedience will not function without there being something to resist. *The Stanley Parable* (2013)[148] is an exploration of the joy found in rebellion. The game deliberately sets up a conflict between narrative and gameplay—sometimes referred as *ludonarrative dissonance*[149]—to produce comedy. At a glance, Stanley Parable seems like a fairly straightforward game. The player takes control of Stanley, an office clerk stuck in an

146 Araszkiewicz, M., Banas, P., Gizbert-Studnicki, T. and Pleszka, K. (2015). Problems of Normativity, Rules and Rule-Following. Springer International Publishing, p.11.

147 Hietalahti, J. (2016). Humor and Disobedience : Understanding Controversial Humor. Filosofiska notiser, [online] 3(3), p.29. Available at: filosofiskanotiser.com/Hietalahti16_3_1.pdf [Accessed 7 Mar. 2018].

148 Galactic Cafe. (2013). The Stanley Parable. Windows.

149 Hocking, C. (2007). Ludonarrative Dissonance in Bioshock. [online] Click Nothing. Available at: clicknothing.typepad.com/click_nothing/2007/10/ludonarrative-d.html [Accessed 5 Mar. 2018].

empty office building trying to find his way out. Throughout the game, he is guided by an antenarrative voiceover: Stanley's actions are narrated in past tense, yet antecedent to the player performing them. The narrator trusts the player to obey his guidance, but since the retrospective narration is not in sync with the living story, the player is now presented with a choice of either complying or resisting. The narrator presents the player path as a linear line to follow, but the world constantly teases the player with choice. Adhering to the narrators guidance is rewarded with an ironic plot-line, where they are subject to disabling a mind controlling apparatus and escape to freedom. Despite the narrator wishing the player to accept his guidance, the game counts on the player to repel the instructions. The narrator might tell the player to take the left door, but fully expects them to open the right one instead. The branching narrative structure is a proof that the player disobedience is in fact the wanted reaction. Unlike in many other games, the narrative does not suspend when the player decides to head to a seemingly unwanted direction. Instead, the narrator gets increasingly frustrated by each wrong turn and attempts to make the player to return to the intended path. Stanley's actions are under a giant magnifying glass, and it is made aware to the player by the narrator's ceaseless commentary.

The game's comedy is a result of the friction between the authority (*the narrator*) and the individual (*the player*). The game acknowledges the players' urge to contradict its narrative and uses ludonarrative dissonance as a deceptive device to prompt comedic surprises. Apart from being an interesting study on game design, The Stanley Parable's comedy is unique to the interactive medium. The player's amusement might be comparable to the one a puppy with a stolen piece of underwear experiences while being chased around the house, but the entertainment value is undeniable.

Misconduct is also central to the humor of the Grand Theft

Auto games. The comedy largely ensues from the player acting lawless and breaking social norms in an extravagant version of the real world. The world of GTA is also filled with bits of embedded humor, yet it is the player interacting with the game world that evokes the biggest laughs. The game systems encourage the player to cross lines that one would not dare to cross in real life. The dynamic open world provides randomness to the gameplay, causing constant surprises and leading to humorous scenarios. The player can make the playable character drive under an influence or shout obscenities at pedestrians. The repercussions range from getting into brawls to drawing attention from the police.

As the player approaches a situation, they might predict that they are getting into trouble but the exact turn of events is unpredictable to them. Mullins discusses randomness in game design (2016)[150] in an article titled "Predictable Unpredictability." He postulates that randomness in video games serves two purposes: it excludes a game from the realm of puzzles with unequivocal solutions; and pushes a player to practice their creativity, to react and improvise. Predictable unpredictability is not true randomness, but rather randomness within predefined parameters. A player might be aware of the repercussions of their actions but is unable to foresee the consequences in advance. Interfering with the AI in Grand Theft Auto games ignites a new challenge that forces the player to deal with the situation at hand. The potentially farcical domino effect that a simple action may instigate is both the challenge and the reward: a player-generated comedic narrative.

Comedy gets less impactful when it relies solely on the audience's interpretation of a scene, which is why comedy actually lives in the reaction to the comic incident. Similarly, emergent ludonarrative comedy is born in the reaction to the player's

150 Mullins, M. (2016). Predictable Unpredictability. [online] The Indie Game Report (TIGR). Available at: www.theindiegamereport.com/predictable-unpredictability [Accessed 13 Oct. 2017].

actions. In cinema and television, a comedic line or an action is generally acquainted with a reaction shot—a portrayal of another person's response to the scene. Because in games the player is usually the one controlling the camera, the reaction has to come from somewhere else. This is why emergent comedy demands a reactive world. Schafer (2010)[151], while discussing comedy and video games, remarks: "It's not how smart the AI is but rather how much the characters in the game seem to recognize what is happening." Artificial intelligence needs to be applied where it matters the most, acknowledging the player's actions and reacting to them accordingly. Some games are better than others at recognizing eccentric player actions.

The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild features a reactive world, that encourages the players to experiment. The game's many challenges can be approached in numerous ways, because the world is built upon a variety of disparate game systems that interact with each other naturally. Players can also express themselves by customizing the main protagonist's, Link's, appearance with gear of their choice. For a portion of players that naturally means undressing him, but should the player approach other characters while Link is stripped down to his boxers, they will get a fitting response. A young lady in a village blushes and asks Link to cover himself. A shopkeeper tries to sell clothes to the half-naked hero, and others call him—deservedly—as a total creep. The characters also react in various funny ways should the player make Link climb on their dining tables or draw a sword on their proximity. The player's abnormal behavior is made apparent by the reactions of the surrounding world. As developers have to look at the ways that the players are breaking the rules of a game, they comparably have to figure out responses for players' attempts to break character.

151 Pratchett, R., Schafer, T., Teti, J. and Vanaman, S. (2010). Make 'Em Laugh: Comedy in Games. Available at: www.gdcvault.com/play/1012287/Make-Em-Laugh-Comedy-in [Accessed 30 May 2017].

V

Comic Enhancers and Their Role in Ludonarratives

The setting in a video game contextualizes and justifies the player's actions in it. Video game worlds are hypernormalized realms, or as Huizinga (1947)[152] and later, Salen and Zimmerman (2003)[153] define it, artificial spaces that suspend and replace the reality of the world and what is considered normal in it. The game wishes its audience to accept the implausibility that these worlds hold, hoping that the players would not question their artificial rules and boundaries. A game has the responsibility to fascinate the player, because due to their freedom of movement, narrative details may hinge upon the player noticing them. Comedy can be regarded as a way of captivating the player's attention, as it is exceptionally charismatic way of conveying narrative information to them. But in order for comedy to work as intended, it requires to be highlighted. In comedic narratives, various humor enhancers can be used, not only to captivate the players' curiosity, but also to prepare them for the full experience of humor (MARSZALEK, 2012: 7)[154]. They are the way for the author to highlight the comic premise of a game, and indirectly address the current state of affairs of the game world to the player. In the following sections, the comedy-enhancing techniques and their relation to the game world and the player alike are explored.

152 Huizinga, J. (1947). Homo Ludens. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

153 Salen, K., Zimmerman, E. (2003). Rules of Play. Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

154 Marsalzek, A. (2012). Humorous Worlds: A Cognitive Stylistic Approach to the Creation of Humour in Comic Narratives. Master's thesis. University of Glasgow, pp.24–25.

V.I

Humorous Worlds

Marszalek (2012: 7)[155] calls narrative worlds that project a general impression of humor as "humorous worlds." These worlds, she argues, comedically intensify certain elements that appear in them. Although Marszalek's concept of humorous worlds stems from literary works and her samples are collected from various novels, many of her conclusions can be applied to video games as well. What makes video games different from other media is that the players can actually spend time in their respected virtual worlds. They are physical spaces. A comedic video game ideally encourages and reacts to the players humorous aspirations. The longer the comedic narrative is, according to Marzalek (2012: 100)[156], the more work is required to establish a "joking relationship" with the audience. She maintains that jokes, for their concise form, are more distinctly identified as humorous discourse than novels. Similarly smaller and focused comedic games convey their humorous intentions better than games that demand days of playtime. Every facet of the concise video game *Jazzpunk* (2014)[157] reminds the audience of its comedic focus. Games do not have many established attributes that help them to be identified as comedic productions. The cues, or the "humor enhancers," as Triezenberg (2008: 538)[158] calls them, do not necessarily have to be funny on their own, but they must help the audience to perceive

155 Marsalzek, A. (2012). Humorous Worlds: A Cognitive Stylistic Approach to the Creation of Humour in Comic Narratives. Master's thesis. University of Glasgow, p.7.

156 Marsalzek, A. (2012). Humorous Worlds: A Cognitive Stylistic Approach to the Creation of Humour in Comic Narratives. Master's thesis. University of Glasgow, p.100.

157 Adult Swim Games. (2014). Jazzpunk. Windows.

158 Triezenberg, K. (2008). Humor In Literature. The Primer of Humor Research, Raskin, V. (ed.), p. 538.

something that is meant to be funny. As discussed earlier, a title featuring the word *simulator* may indicate a game being a work of comedy, but even then it is for the audience to interpret whether or not it is used sarcastically.

An attempt at humor has to be understood as an intended deviation from normal for it to be effective. To figure out a joke a listener has to understand it to be nonliteral, even untrue. Mulkay (1988)[159] states that humans interact with each other in two very different communication modes, in a *serious* and in a *humorous mode*. According to him, the countless deep-rooted contradiction in human communication led to the evolution of the humorous mode. The humorous mode gets activated when a person notices contradictions, incongruities, or errors in the regular patterns of behavior— what they consider normal. Furthermore, Marzalek (2012: 90–117)[160] asserts that humorous mode is the state where humorous narratives are interpreted most effectively. It is a result of carefully positioned cues by the author about the comedic nature of the material. When a game world is viewed as an entity communicating with the player, it can be used to influence the player's mood, and to get them in a humorous mode. It can be done by establishing a level of normality, following a subversion of the established code of conduct. In video games, normativeness can be communicated by how the world reacts to the player-controlled character, or how the character reacts to the actions of the player. Marzalek also stresses the importance of presenting comedic material with such clarity that the audience understands the playfulness and becomes receptive to it. Comedy is all about understanding, and understanding is all about clarity.

159 Mulkay, M. (1988). On Humor: Its Nature and Its Place in Modern Society. New York: Basil, Blackwell.

160 Marsalzek, A. (2012). Humorous Worlds: A Cognitive Stylistic Approach to the Creation of Humour in Comic Narratives. Master's Thesis. University of Glasgow. pp.90–117.

V.II

Environmental Storytelling and Its Relation to Comedy

Environmental storytelling is non-textual story progression, that is a popular method of telling and expanding stories in video games. The style is popular due to its suitability for the medium. Jenkins (2004)[161] applauds environmental storytelling for creating preconditions for engaging narrative experiences by evoking pre-existing narrative associations, providing a staging ground for narrative events; embedding narrative information within the arrangement of the scenery, and providing resources for emergent narratives. It is a form of storytelling that never interrupts the flow of the gameplay. In addition, the players themselves can choose how much—or little— they want to learn about the world. There is a story in the ambiance and it is for the players to unearth and reconstruct it—that is, if they have the motivation.

A well-crafted world provides a strong foundation for environmental and situational humor. Environmental comedy utilizes similar building blocks to many jokes. However, when comedy is integrated to the environments, the placement and the arrangement of the comedic fragments require careful planning and precision. One of Marszalek's main assertions is the importance of "repetition and variation" as a comedy-enabling instrument (2012: 60–87)[162]. The technique that works in jokes—set-up, repeated set-up, and pay-off—can also be applied to comedic

161 Jenkins, H. (2004). Game Design as Narrative Architecture. [online] Electronic Book Review. Available at: www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/firstperson/lazzi-fair [Accessed 7 Mar. 2018].

162 Marsalzek, A. (2012). Humorous Worlds: A Cognitive Stylistic Approach to the Creation of Humour in Comic Narratives. Master's thesis. University of Glasgow. pp. 60–87.

world building. Repetition establishes the world and how normality manifests in it, while variation in the pattern can make it humorous and unveil comedic abnormality. Variation is the resolution for the joke, and ideeally comes from outside the range of the observer's expectations. The reveal of the affable deception releases tension and usually results in laughter—or at least in a polite smile. It is important that the player witnesses at least the initial set-up, and the final punchline. They are required to be placed so that the player is incapable of missing them.

Critics have pointed out that environmental storytelling is not exactly interactive if all the player does is detective work by connecting narrative fragments inside their head. Why do these potentially great stories have to be video games, asks Bogost (2017)[163] in an Atlantic article provocatively titled "Video Games Are Better Without Stories." His argument is built around an assumption that each medium has an aesthetic foundation and everything—including stories—should derive from that. "Poetry aestheticizes language. Painting aestheticizes flatness and pigment. Photography does so for time. Film, for time and space. Architecture, for mass and void. Television, for economic leisure and domestic habit." Bogost goes on to suggest that the games are true to their aesthetic foundation when they turn everyday objects into play. "Take a ball and a field: you get soccer. Take property-based wealth and the Depression: you get Monopoly. Take patterns of four contiguous squares and gravity: you get Tetris." Bogost's formalistic view of different forms of art is reminiscent of Plato's *Theory of Forms*, but so are the issues in his hypothesis. The problem of universal properties, that comes with Bogost's presumption, ignores all the great art that does not correspond to his model. Games are able to tell stories that would not be as powerful had they been told in any other

163 Bogost, I. (2017). Video Games Are Better Without Stories. [online] The Atlantic. Available at: www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/04/video-games-stories/524148 [Accessed 25 May 2017].

medium. Moreover, Bogost's critique overlooks the narrative aspect of play. Games are effectively stories. A ball and a field do not turn into a game of soccer without the make-believe—a narrative framework. Moreover, a soccer game is far more enjoyable when the observer is aware of the history of the players and the dynamics of the two teams. For all intents and purposes, a soccer match, with its rules deriving from imagination, can be seen as a work of fiction.

The world cannot be stripped from stories, as they are so central to the human existence. Klug (LEBOWITZ AND KLUG, 2012: 9)[164] stresses that should game designers abdicate their authorial responsibility to tie gameplay into story, the players will compile a story themselves to put their actions into context. Shermer (2011)[165] proclaims that we are predisposed to infuse meaning, intention and agency to patterns that lack them. Furthermore, Rose (2011)[166] describes stories as recognizable patterns, in which we seek meaning. "We use stories to make sense of our world and to share that understanding with others. They are the signal within the noise," he concludes. Games may not need stories but the audience does. Walker (2017)[167] considers storytelling as a solution to the rationalization problem that each new game set-up and its artificial rules create: "we invent new problems so that we can solve them with new stories." A story can be used to hide seams in a game's design, Walker argues. Similarly, comedy can be seen as a solution rather than a design problem. After all, people are always inclined to seek reasons to laugh. The lack of comical awareness, much like the lack of story, does not make

164 Lebowitz, J. and Klug, C. (2012). Interactive Storytelling for Video Games. Amsterdam: CRC Press, p.9.

165 Shermer, M. (2011). The Believing Brain. New York: Henry Holt: St. Martin's Griffin, p.86.

166 Rose, F. (2011). The Art of Immersion: Why Do We Tell Stories?. [online] WIRED. Available at: www.wired.com/2011/03/why-do-we-tell-stories [Accessed 28 Aug. 2017].

167 Walker, A. (2017). Stories in Games Aren't Problems, They're Solutions. [online] Waypoint. Available at: waypoint.vice.com/en_us/article/ez3mkj/stories-in-games-arent-problems-theyre-solutions [Accessed 21 Feb. 2018].

a game unplayable but it can make the player seek hilarity from unwanted places. Due to the player's active presence in games, humor is not something that can be simply removed from them.

V.III

The Importance of Established Normality

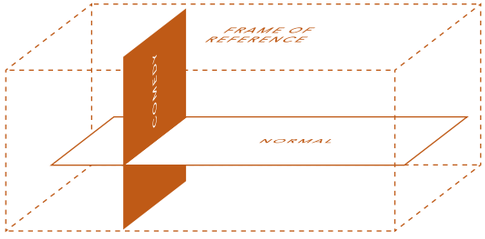
When deconstructed, all comedy seems to either directly or indirectly reference what is considered to be truthful or normal within its frame of reference. Slapstick exceeds the boundaries of normal behavior. Parody and satire denormalize pre-existing authoritative messages through imitation, and observational comedy illuminates the mundane aspects of everyday life that have become invisible to us. Mulkay (1988)[168] affirms humor being a form of indirect communication, that aims to transmit implicit, positive or negative messages to others in order to influence their way of thinking or acting. Not only is the baseline of normalcy hidden in humor, but it is vital for the observer to comprehend it. Comedy is, as Steve Martin puts it in his memoir *Born Standing Up*, "a distortion of what's happening."[169] Through the distortion, the true proportions of topics in question are revealed. Laughing can reveal our own hidden biases since comedy tends to break cultural norms and unveil hidden truths in taboos.

According to the Bergsonian view[170], laughter or the lack thereof can be seen as a social tool for pointing out when things

168 Mulkay, M. (1988). On Humor: Its Nature and Its Place in Modern Society. New York: Basil, Blackwell.

169 Martin, S. (2007). Born Standing Up [Audiobook], Narrated by Martin, S. Available at: www.amazon.com/Born-Standing-Up-Comics-Life/dp/B000ZM8GL8 [Accessed 31 Mar. 2018].

170 Bergson, H. (1911). Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic. New York: The Macmillan Company, pp.87–88.



All comedy seems to either directly or indirectly reference the baseline of normality within its frame of reference.

are out of line. Among other things, our sense of humor is a sense for detecting abnormality. A humorous observation is often an exposition of something atypical or abnormal. "Normal" is the standard, to which the emerging occurrences in life are compared, and measured against. It is relative to its point of reference as it changes with the context. What is normal in one situation is abnormal in another one. Bergson describes laughter as a "social gesture" and theorizes that comedy exists to serve society by exposing unsociable behavior to laughter and mockery that subsequently corrects the course.[171] The essence and the foundation of Bergson's theory is that we agree upon certain models of accepted social behavior and agree that normalcy in some form exists—conceding that its outlines are impossible to render. Comedian John Cleese proclaims humor being a form of criticism in disguise, due to its capacity to help us judge the relative importance of things. "With humor goes the sense of proportion," he declares.[172] Thomas Veatch hypothesizes in the paper *A Theory of Humor* (1998) that humor occurs when a situation is perceived as a violation of a subjective moral principle in a situation that is simultaneously conceived as normal. When the sense of normalcy is lost in a situation, there can be no perceived

171 Bergson, H. (1911). Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic. New York: The Macmillan Company, pp.87–88.

172 Cleese, J. (2016). We Can't Have Comedy and Be Politically Correct at the Same Time. [online] Big Think. Available at: bigthink.com/videos/john-cleese-on-political-correctness [Accessed 8 Aug. 2017].

humor in it. Furthermore, Veatch points out that there is nothin objective about humor. Both normal and violation are views of a situation (1998: 165–166)[173]. Peter McGraw and Joel Warner come to similar conclusions in the book *The Humor Code: A Global Search for What Makes Things Funny* (2004)[174]. According to the proposed *Benign Violation Theory* presented in the book "humor only occurs when something seems wrong, unsettling or threatening (i.e. a violation), but simultaneously seems okay, acceptable, or safe (i.e. benign)" The book explains puns as linguistic violations that still make sense grammatically, and sarcasm being a violation of accepted rules of a conversation, by meaning the opposite of what is said (MCGRAW AND WARNER, 2014: 1–17).

Because all games are artificial, they often face challenges in normalizing their own fictional domains, which the players are required to accept as their new, short-term realities. Video games need to normalize the rules that govern them, but also the words in which they are set. Comedy and humor can be used as an indirect method to communicate the state of affairs of the realm to the player. *South Park: The Stick of Truth*[175] takes the world from the television show—which in itself is a satirical take on the real world—and uses it as a backdrop for a live action role-playing session, involving the children of South Park. As every other child in the town is in pretense that wizards, elves and magic are real, the player is expected to play along. The combat is turn-based, because according to *he grand wizard king* Eric Cartman, it is faithful to how battles were fought in the "olden times." The world in the background keeps on moving as the role-playing children politely wait for their turn in combat. "I know it's lame but that's

173 Veatch, T. (1998). A Theory of Humor. Humor: International Journal of Humor Research, 11(2), pp.165–166. Available at: www.tomveatch.com/else/humor/paper/index.html [Accessed 31 Mar. 2018].

174 McGraw, P. and Warner, J. (2014). The Humor Code: A Global Search for What Makes Things Funny. New York: Simon & Schuster.

175 Ubisoft. (2014). South Park: The Stick of Truth. PlayStation 3.

how we are doing it," Cartman explains to one of the characters growing impatient of the system. The role-playing subplot of Stick of Truth is satire of the game's self-deployed magic circle; the introspective humor helps to anchor the gameplay mechanics to the fiction of South Park. The game never lets the player forget that its rules are arbitrary and that its plot concerns kids playing with wooden swords.

For the audience, comedy is not so much about questioning than it is about submitting to a world view. Someone else has done the questioning and the thinking, and the audience is there just to enjoy the conclusions. Lippman (2015)[176] suggests that not only does comedy reference what is considered normal, but it can actively transform it. Having studied romantic comedy films featuring overly persistent men, she discovered it leading to the female viewership tolerating similarly obsessive behavior in real life. Thus, comedy is also an instrument of normalization. It can transform culture and change our expectations about the nature of reality. A comedic observation nudges the audience's subjective reality, and the induced laughter is a trick that makes the audience momentarily agree with the presented view.

Game designers can use observational comedy as a tool to reveal inconsistencies and illogicalities within their game worlds, to point out abnormality. For instance, when viewed through a comedic lens, the world of the *Super Mario* games becomes filled with figurative question marks—in addition to being filled with actual, physical question marks. The relationships and the motivations of the characters fluctuate depending on the day. Bowser is either a villain terrorizing the Mushroom Kingdom, or a good enough comrade with whom it is safe to play golf or share a go-kart. The personality turnaround is never explained or questioned by any of the characters involved. Although the

176 Lippman, J. (2015). I Did It Because I Never Stopped Loving You. Communication Research, p.009365021557065.

Super Mario games are built on jolly aesthetics and euphonics, there is little to no humor in the world. The hills and the clouds and the mushrooms all smile and laugh, but not as a result of any comedic occurrence. Jokes would get lost in the world of Super Mario, as laughing is the default state for existing. The baseline for what is considered normal in the world is already glee. Because so little is explained to the player, the "all smiles" design principle can be interpreted as either festive, or deranged.

V.IV

Comedy as a Method of Restoring the Sense of Proportion

Conductive to comedy, normalcy requires to be highlighted to reveal the contrast to the ludicrous. An embodiment of this contrasting is a character type referred as *comedic foil*. A comedic foil contrasts another character in a way that highlights comicality in a scene. When the foil character is the voice of reason who momentarily establishes or restores normality in the scene, they are referred as the *straight man*. The juxtaposition of ludicrous with the normal creates a point of reference that highlights the humorous angle. The television show *The Office*[177] constantly utilizes the straight man dynamic when delivering its jokes. The mockumentary-style sitcom draws humor from violations of workplace etiquette in a fictional Dunder Mifflin Paper Company. The role of the straight man is mainly played by the show's lead character, Jim Halpert, who will often react to his colleagues' awkward social behavior with a blank stare at the camera. Because the humor is subtle compared to other

177 The Office. (2005–2013). NBC.

sitcoms with blaring laugh tracks, the straight man has a big role in pointing out what is divergent from normal. In The Office, the purpose of straight man is to discharge tension, but to also signal the audience when they are permitted to laugh.

Many theorists recognize that humor has a tension-releasing function. Some have suggested that it may even be a defining quality in all things funny (MARTIN, 2006: 20–26)[178]. Most jokes rely on built up tension and punch-lines that deflate it. The tension relieving aspect of humor becomes evident in stressful or anxiety-provoking situations, where the inclusion of humor engenders positive thoughts and emotions. Gross and Muñoz (1995)[179] regard humor as an emotion regulating mechanism that is beneficial for a person's mental health. Relief theory considers all amusing scenarios as a consequence of built-up tension and the function of humor as a release valve for psychological distress. Humor enables people expressing their inner desires and helps them to cope with shock and the hardships of life.[180, 181] Some researchers consider laughing as a sort of *biological false alarm*[182], a vocal signal that is set off when a presumed danger is exposed as non-threatening.

Humor that cuts through the tension has been adapted to a technique called *comic relief*. Comic relief comes into action when the suspense of a scene needs a sudden halt. Sometimes a comic relief appears as a personification, other times as *bathos*.

178 Martin, R. (2006). The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach. 1st ed. Amsterdam: Elsevier Academic Press, p.20–26.

179 Gross, J. J., & Muñoz, R. F. (1995). Emotion regulation and mental health. Clinical Psychology: Science & Practice, 2(2), pp.151–164.

180 Buijzen, M.; Valkenburg, P. M. (2004). Developing a Typology of Humor in Audiovisual Media. Media Psychology. 6 (2): pp.147–167.

181 Meyer, J. C. (2000). Humor as a Double-Edged Sword: Four Functions of Humor in Communication. Communication Theory. 10 (3): pp.310–331.

182 Ramachandran V. S. (1998). The Neurology and Evolution of Humor, Laughter, and Smiling: the False Alarm Theory. PubMed: 351–354. Available at: www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/9824844 [Accessed 31 Mar. 2018].

Originated by Alexander Pope[183], the concept of bathos refers to an incongruous technique that abruptly transforms a serious scene to ludicrous. It can be a piece of dialogue or a sudden comedic occurrence. Comic relief momentarily reframes the situation at hand. It is a familiar character archetype from many films. Characters such as C-3PO from Star Wars[184] and Bender from Futurama[185] exist to remind the audience that the scene they are watching is not to be taken too seriously. Most games are designed to provoke emotional excitement, but this intensity can easily provoke frustration in the players. Because the humorous and the competitive mindset rarely exists simultaneously in the same person, comic relief can be used to quickly discharge built up tension and restore the player to a more tranquil frame of mind. Dormannn and Biddle (2009)[186] recognize the players' appreciation for the brief, intentional or unintentional moments of comic relief that they experience in games, claiming that these moments hold almost cathartic value.

Uncharted 2: Among Thieves (2009)[187] is a game of high intensity gunplay and set pieces that in real life would unnerve even the bravest of daredevils. The game acknowledges the stress that it generates through the talkative main character, Nathan Drake, who is a complete opposite of the silent protagonist trope. After a narrow escape from a collapsing building, Drake bursts into laughter and comments under his breath: "We we're almost in that!" The line is a cue for the player to relax, to take a breath until the next encounter commences. Drake's voiced observations guide the player to the right direction, both navigationally

183 Pope, A. (1968). Peri Bathous, Or the Art of Sinking in Poetry. New York: Russell & Russell.

184 Star Wars. (1977–). [film series] Created by George Lucas.

185 Futurama. (1999–2013). Fox (1999–2003), Comedy Central (2008–2013).

186 Dormann, C. and Biddle, R. (2009). A Review of Humor for Computer Games: Play, Laugh and More. Simulation & Gaming, 40(6), p.810.

187 Sony Computer Entertainment. (2009). Uncharted 2: Among Thieves. PlayStation 3.

and emotionally. They reflect the player's state of mind while undergoing these nerve-racking scenes. Drake is the protagonist, the narrator, and the comic relief. His adrenalin-infused sense of humor is what defines him. "He's fit and healthy, but he's also a bit clumsy," Richard Lemarchand of Naughty Dog describes Drake's character (STUART, 2016)[188]. Amy Hennig, the game's writer-director describes Nathan Drake's person-defining trait being his vulnerability[188]. He makes mistakes but has the ability to laugh at his own stumbles, much like the player controlling him.

The moments of interactive comic relief can also appear as incidentally triggered mechanical implementations. When the player hijacks a car in *Grand Theft Auto IV* (2008)[189], its rightful owner might resist and grab at the car door handle, only to get dragged along the pavement with the fleeing vehicle. Other times the vehicle might contain passengers, who will remain seated while the player commits the car theft and drives away, the passengers still screaming in fear next to them. The car's owner might even surprise the car-nabbing player with a gun that they will start firing towards them. Such transgressive conduct that would be horrifying in real life, becomes amusing in the fictive world of GTA. The inability to obtain a vehicle can be considered a failure by the player to fulfill their objectives, but the unpredictable comedic twists lessen the disappointment. Dormannn and Biddle (2009: 819)[190] maintain that humor meditates changes in our emotional state, providing relief to situations that would otherwise frustrate or discourage. A failure does not need to result into the end of play by necessity, for it may provide additional challenges for the player to overcome and thus encourage more creative approaches.

188 Stuart, K. (2016). Why Do We Love Nathan Drake? Uncharted 4 Designer Explains All. [online] The Guardian. Available at: www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/apr/07/nathan-drake-uncharted-4-naughty-dog [Accessed 13 Oct. 2017].

189 Rockstar Games. (2008). Grand Theft Auto IV. PlayStation 3.

190 Dormann, C. and Biddle, R. (2009). A Review of Humor for Computer Games: Play, Laugh and More. Simulation & Gaming, 40(6), p.819.

V.V

Embracing Superiority Humor in Video Games

Superiority theory considers humor as a form of aggression. The term *schadenfreude*, or *gloating* in common vernacular corresponds to the theory's view of humor as a primordial response to the misfortune of other people. Gruner (1997: 8–9)[191] regards joking as a friendly game where laughing equals winning, and inversely not laughing equals losing. By winning, he means "reaching a specific condition or place," which in the case of humor means getting the final laugh. Winners are usually recognized with a reward but Gruner admits that it is not always easy to figure out what has been won. He also admits that laughter is not the best metric to measure who is ahead in the race. Carr and Greaves (2006: 89–92)[192] also acknowledge the will to win being a fitting motivation behind a lot of humor and a useful explanation for our response to certain jokes. However, they also note that if a comedian telling a clever joke is considered a winner, the audience, who gets rewarded with laughter should be considered losing in that situation. It is true that joking can be snide, unkind, or even outright mean. The term *butt of a joke* can be interpreted to signify the loser in the comic play. Although the competitive, antagonistic humor is not the only reason we laugh, it translates very well into the dueling nature of many video games.

Acts of aggression make compelling gameplay mechanics. Because so many video games utilize the act of killing as the only

191 Gruner, C. (1997). The Game of Humor. 1st ed. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers. pp.8–9.

192 Carr, J. and Greeves, L. (2006). The Naked Jape: Uncovering The Hidden World Of Jokes. 1st ed. London: Penguin, 2007. pp.89–92.

way to interact with the game world, it could be considered a defining quality for the medium. Conflict is a major tension-generating component in narratives, and killing just happens to be an efficient way to resolve a conflict. Ken Levine, the creator of the video game *BioShock* (2007)[193], proclaims (TAKAHASHI, 2018)[194] that shooting in games resolves many design problems: "You have weapons, you have enemies, you have conflict coming at you," However, Levine also recognizes that the consumers of the interactive entertainment have increasing confidence in the industry to express itself in more diverse ways. Video games did not invent the action genre, but it is apparent that they resort to violence more often than other media does. Violence, that generates a feeling of empowerment, resonates with us, but there are other ways to simulate that sensation. The feeling of being in control also comes with laughter. When humor is regarded as a form of aggression, interesting gameplay opportunities arise.

V.V.I
INSULT COMEDY AS A GAME MECHANIC

One of the more popular forms of insult comedy, if not all contemporary comedy, is called *roasting*. It refers to an event where an individual is ridiculed for the entertainment of spectators. Traditionally a roast setup consists of *the guest of honor*—preferably a notable figure, who is seated facing the audience—and *the roastmaster*, the master of ceremony who conducts the lampoonery. Akin to a verbal caricature, a roast paints a distorted portrayal of the subject for a comedic effect. The performance is

193 2K Games. (2007). BioShock. Windows.

194 Takahashi, D. (2018). Ken Levine Opens Up on the Violence in BioShock Infinite. [online] VentureBeat. Available at: venturebeat.com/2014/06/30/ken-levine-opens-up-on-the-violence-in-bioshock-infinite [Accessed 8 Mar. 2018].

supposed to be liberating for all partakers, as the guest of honor is the laughing stock by their own choice. Roasting is a game. As any other game, a roast with its social rules forms a magic circle and the people involved are expected to play along. From outside of the circle, the event may appear mean-spirited, but inside of it everyone is just playing their part. The role of the roastmaster is to get under the roastee's skin by mocking them, and the guest of honor in turn is expected to withstand the ceaseless insults. By managing to do so, the ephemeral moment of humiliation transforms into victory—admiration from the audience. Withstanding a roast is of representative of what is quintessential for classical comedy, defiance in the face of misery.

Roasting, being a form of play, and coinciding with Gruner's adaptation[195] of superiority theory, can be easily translated to the form of video games as well. However, weaponized humor as a mechanic for player-generated aggression is not exactly an original idea. The comedic pirating adventure game The Secret of Monkey Island introduced an activity called *insult sword fighting* to the world. In it the player engages in a sword fight with an opponent, but throughout the fencing the duelists take pauses to launch insults at each other. When the protagonist, Guybrush Threepwood, gets hit with an insult, he is then forced to rebound it with a witty response. Upon failing the player gets thrown off their guard, but by succeeding they will gain the upper hand in the battle, and get to continue with the roasting. The list of possible insults and responses are fairly limited, but selecting the correct comeback is still satisfying.

OPPONENT There are no words for how disgusting you are.
GUYBRUSH Yes there are. You just never learned them.

195 Gruner, C. (1997). The Game of Humor. 1st ed. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers.

The actual insults and comebacks are a little lukewarm, but there is the added value of figuring out what most fitting line is. The jokes are funnier because the game makes the player feel like they came up with them. The insults are not observational as the game does not take into account any of the opponents' looks or mannerisms, but for a game released in 1991 the comedic shaming was an inventive substitute to violence.

Although the insult sword fighting is not the comedic high point of The Secret of Monkey Island, the joke crafting mechanic inspired other developers. *Oh...Sir!! The Insult Simulator* (2016)[196] contains a comparable multiple-choice roast mechanic, but the game swaps the scurvy pirate jest into British humor-infused verbal sparring. Unlike in insult sword fighting where the dialogue options are full phrases, The Insult Simulator lets the player to compose their insults piece by piece from a pool of individual verbs, nouns, adjectives, and pronouns. The tweak expands the number of possible insults, but results into lines that barely make sense comedically.

> Your mother plays hidden object games and doesn't like your mother, and everyone knows that!

The end results make little to no sense, no matter how much effort the player puts into them. Oh...Sir!! The Insult Simulator utilizes the argumentative rejoinder "your mother" recurrently, perhaps to make the sentences at least externally resemble actual jokes. Though the moment-to-moment gameplay can be quite amusing, the game itself never reaches the obnoxiousness of the spoken word "trash-talking" game *Dozens*[197]. Although the end result does not quite reach its comedic potential, verbal humor

196 Good Shepherd Entertainment. (2016). Oh...Sir!! The Insult Simulator.

197 Originator unknown. (Undated). Dozens [Spoken word game].

as a gameplay foundation should remain an area of further exploration. The popular party game *Cards Against Humanity* (2011)[198] remains a proof, that systems-based comedy is achievable with the right mix of vision, innuendo, and trust for the players.

Insult comedy runs a risk of getting the player agitated when they are at the receiving end of the festive abuse. Multiplayer games with text or voice chats are the most notorious example of aggression overrunning comedy. Lighthearted banter can abruptly turn into demoralizing insults, that can result the player quitting the game and never returning. Salen and Zimmerman (2003: 477)[199] contend that in a "cutthroat social ecosystem of the playground, games are often contexts for asserting and challenging social power." When the feelings boil over, humor ceases to exist and communication becomes demeaning. It is evidently better when a game sets up borders for the player behavior, by either moderating or constraining it, when other players are involved. When the ridicule is directed at the character they are playing, and not so much towards the player and their abilities, the game has a better chance of making the player laugh. Ron Gilbert likens[200] the effect to the player analogously divorcing themselves: "I don't think anybody, when they're playing Monkey Island or The Cave, thinks they are those people on the screen, but they definitely empathize with them, and they do relate to them, and they do feel a big attachment to them. So you have to be careful that the humor is making fun of the character and not what the player did with the character, because then you're insulting the player and not the character." However, Dormann

198 Cards Against Humanity LLC. (2011). Cards Against Humanity [Card game].

199 Salen, K., Zimmerman, E. (2003). Rules of Play. Massachusetts: The MIT Press, p.477.

200 Agnello, J. (2012). Funny People: Ron Gilbert, Maniac Mansion and Monkey Island Creator. [online] Gameological. Available at: www.gameological.com/2012/07/funny-people-ron-gilbert [Accessed 23 Aug. 2017].

and Biddle (2006: 814)[201] note that although humor can be used as to humiliate the opponent, it can also make the aggressiveness and tenseness that are associated with competitive gameplay more acceptable and endurable.

In order for the game to be able to roast the player, it first needs to be aware of their ventures. Of all media, interactive entertainment has the unique ability to track what the player does in them, where they go, what they decide and how they choose to decorate their avatar. For comedic aspirations, player tracking and data collection has potential for far more than what it is currently utilized for. Games scan the player's motions in great detail but few of them make observations, and even fewer make remarks based on them.

Some games have toyed with the idea of comedically insulting the player based on their actions but with varying results. The 1999 Dreamcast game, *Seaman*[202] makes fun of the player for engaging with it too frequently. Games like *Earthworm Jim* (1994)[203] and *Punch-Out!!* (2009)[204] make fun of the player for choosing a low difficulty level. Other games will call the player out when catching them cheating. In an attempt to cheat by resetting the console in *Animal Crossing* (2009)[205], a character called Resetti appears on screen yelling, "I said not to reset!" and gives them a long lecture about the importance of saving before turning the game off. Hamann (2014)[206] considers player tracking as a solution to the comic timing problem. He suggests that structuring

201 Dormann, C. and Biddle, R. (2009). A Review of Humor for Computer Games: Play, Laugh and More. Simulation & Gaming, 40(6), p.814.

202 Sega. (1999). Seaman. Dreamcast.

203 Interplay Entertainment. (1994). Earhworm Jim. Sega Genesis.

204 Nintendo. (2009). Punch-Out!!. Wii.

205 Nintendo. (2001). Animal Crossing. Gamecube.

206 Hamann, R. (2014). Comedy in Videogames. [online] Cane and Rinse. Available at: caneandrinse.com/comedy-videogames [Accessed 30 May 2017].

the timing around the player's actions instead of the character's actions will make the game world more reactive to the choices made in the real world. Hamann also recognizes that the subjects of such jokes would be external to the game, and not about events taking place within its fiction.

Games do their utmost to engage and immerse the player, but all art—including comedy—requires a certain amount of emotional distance. The term *estrangement effect*, or *defamiliarization effect*, coined by Bertolt Brech[207], represents the author's desire to influence the audience and guide their way of thinking. By estranging themselves from a piece of art, the observer is better prepared to analyze it. Immersion is equal to automatic reception but estrangement represents intellectual analysis. Perfect immersion in art may be unattainable, but from the point of view of comedy, it is emancipating. Bergson (1911: 4)[208] stresses that "laughter has no greater foe than emotion." He argues that in order for humor to occur, indifference has to take place: "The comic, we said, appeals to the intelligence, pure and simple; laughter is incompatible with emotion."[209] These words resonate well with the act of roasting. The partakers of a roast are in an act. Without the protection of their role, that isolates emotion from the insults, the guest of honor would get offended. Similarly, in a video game the player is protected by their role. Everything that appears to happen to them, in actuality happens to the character they are playing. Were a player to be ridiculed by a video game, they would be protected by the magic circle of play. The virtual reality of a game is a simulation crafted exclusively for the beholder, making the player effectively the guest of honor. The

207 White, J. (2004). Bertolt Brecht's Dramatic Theory (Studies in German Literature and Culture). 1st ed. New York. Camden House, p.90.

208 Bergson, H. (1911). Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic. New York: The Macmillan Company, p.4.

209 Bergson, H. (1911). Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic. New York: The Macmillan Company. p.139.

players are entitled to explore worlds and realms envisioned just for them, to meet characters and witness events that would not occur without the observer. A tree does not fall in a video game forest when no one is around to see it. Thereupon the player is also playing the role of the audience, suggesting that they are always going to feel remoteness from the game, the virtual world, and the character they are controlling. The detachment not only allows them to reflect, but permits them to act in ways that would not be acceptable in real life. Salen and Zimmermann (2003: 480)[210] point out that games are capable of subverting norms in social behavior since they often allow or even promote actions that are considered forbidden or even taboo. Therefore, games can be regarded as a safe spaces to practice normally disapproved behavior. Salen and Zimmerman argue that games that permit forbidden play can simultaneously challenge and strengthen the rules of accepted behavior in a society. Whether they are betraying a friend in *Grand Theft Auto Online* (2013)[211] or pillaging strangers' bases in *Minecraft* (2011)[212], the players are well aware that they are subverting norms of socially accepted behavior, despite the fact that the rules of the game would permit such practices.

210 Salen, K., Zimmerman, E. (2003). Rules of Play. Massachusetts: The MIT Press, p.480.

211 Rockstar Games. (2013). Grand Theft Auto Online. PlayStation 3.

212 Mojang. (2011). Minecraft. Windows.

VI

The Three Comical Conflicts

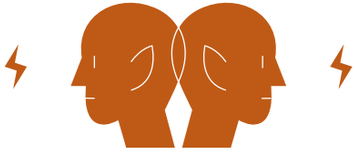
Vorhaus (1994: 19–29)[213] asserts that comedy lives in the gap between comic reality and real reality. He contends that the gap, or a *comic premise,* as it is referred to, is a deliberately chosen point of view that is meant to reveal something humorous in a situation. Vorhaus outlines three recurring layers of comical conflicts that lead up to the comic premise. The first of the conflicts, the *inner conflict* is about a character in war with themselves. The second type of conflict is an interpersonal dispute between two or more characters. Vorhaus calls this the *local conflict*. The third layer is referred to as the *global conflict*—a conflict between a character and the world they are part of. The local and global conflicts can be identified in most comedic games. The inner conflict, being the most introspective of the three, is probably the rarest one to encounter. It is ordinarily manifested in a normal character going through a comical transformation. The three conflicts often overlap in the same production, which is why they are referred to as layers. Vorhaus asserts that the conflicts are capable of casting a light of truth onto a scene: "the comic reality reveals the truth in the 'real' reality." A well-known comedy axiom claims that the best comedy derives from the truth of the moment. "Honest discovery, observation, and reaction is better than contrived invention," proclaims the improv comedy bible *Truth in Comedy* (HALPERN, CLOSE, AND JOHNSON, 1994)[214]. In the following sections, the three layers of comical conflicts and their relation to truth and normality are more closely examined, and demonstrated with examples.

213 Vorhaus, J. (1994). The Comic Toolbox: How to Be Funny Even If You're Not. Beverly Hills, California: Silman-James Press. pp.19–29.

214 Halpern, C., Close, D. and Johnson, K. (1994). Truth in Comedy. 1st ed. Colorado Springs, CO: Meriwether Pub.

VI.I

The Inner Conflict Within a Comical Character



Vorhaus (1994: 26)[215] outlines that the "inner conflict" is about exploration of the character and their emotions, making it a rich source for comedy and drama alike. Because the inner conflict is about the character being in war with themselves as opposed to something external, the surrounding world does not often understand their behavior. To an external observer the actions of the character may seem absurd, as the comedy stems from their unusual and seemingly trivial aspirations. This often translates into comedy with low stakes, in which people care too much about seemingly insignificant matters. Numerous comedy films and television shows embrace the inner conflict: *Parks and Recreation*[216] is a show about small town politics and midlevel bureaucracy; *Vice Principals*[217] tells a story about two vice principals competing for promotion while neglecting their

215 Vorhaus, J. (1994). The Comic Toolbox: How to Be Funny Even if You're Not. Beverly Hills, California: Silman-James Press, p.26.

216 Parks and Recreation. (2009–2015). NBC.

217 Vice Principals. (2016–2017). HBO.

educational responsibilities; and *Superbad*[218] is a movie about two friends strolling across a town to get to a party. Despite many contemporary comedy movies being so called *low-stakes comedies*, the interactive entertainment—due to being obsessive about winning and losing—is not great at keeping the stakes low. Most games are about surviving, or avoiding a looming death. The sole concept of *game over* is an indication that a game intends to keep the players' stress levels high. Emotions, that are at the centre of the inner conflict, such as neuroses and self doubts, are difficult to explore in the interactive medium.

VI.I.I

GAME DESIGN AS A METHOD OF DISCLOSING THE INNER CONFLICT

Incorporating the inner conflict as part of gameplay can make the player an active part of the character's psychological struggle. The amount of mental energy they are consuming can be revealed through activity. Dille and Platten (2007: 143)[219] posit that through gameplay, a video game can show proportionality to the player and provide them with metrics by which they can measure their progress. By focusing on aspects of gameplay that are usually taken for granted, a game can make the player care about its low stakes. The player is likely not to care whether they are in the process of saving the world or preventing milk going sour, as long as the gameplay systems are interesting enough. When the characters and their motivations are honest and believable, their problems—no matter how minuscule they might seem—are justified. If turning everyday objects and scenarios into play is—as

218 Superbad. (2007). [film] Directed by Mottola, G. USA: Columbia Pictures.

219 Dille, F. and Platten, J. (2007). The Ultimate Guide to Video Game Writing and Design. 3rd ed. New York: Watson-Guptill Publications, p.143.

Bogost argues[220]—an inarguable strength of the medium, mundane circumstances can make a game as interesting as anything.

Octodad: Dadliest Catch (2014)[221] exemplifies how contrasting the player intent with their actual performance can reveal something about the inner conflict of the playable character. The game's central character, Octodad, is an undercover dad in a regular human family doing his utmost to conceal his true identity, which is that he is in fact an octopus. Octodad is the *Tootsie*[222] of video games. He is a normal character as an octopus but a comical character as a family man. While his identity is obvious to the player, the aim of the game is not to arouse too much suspicion in his surroundings, while simultaneously trying to lead a normal family life. The game commits to low stakes comedy like few other video games do. The humor, as well as the challenges stem from Octodad's poor disguises, and from the fact that his movement looks and feels like what can be expected from an anthropomorphic octopus on dry land. The premise is simple and goofy, which is why it transforms smoothly to gameplay-driven gags. Chris Suellentrop of *The New York Times* calls Octodad "the funniest video game about being in the closet" he has ever played.[223] Seemingly simple tasks, such as pouring milk, become inexplicably comedic. Wobbly controls, that make everyday tasks a struggle for Octodad, combined with ragdoll physics that exaggerate the consequences of failed actions, are a catalyst for the amusement. However, Octodad's humor is more finespun than the slapstick humor initially suggests. The great revelation about the game, according to the game's Creative

220 Bogost, I. (2017). Video Games Are Better Without Stories. [online] The Atlantic. Available at: www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/04/video-games-stories/524148 [Accessed 25 May 2017].

221 Young Horses. (2014). Octodad: Dadliest Catch. Windows.

222 Tootsie. (1982). [film] Directed by Pollack, S. USA: Mirage Enterprises.

223 Suellentrop, C. (2014). Jazzpunk Video Game Commits to Comedy. [online] New York Times. Available at: www.nytimes.com/2014/02/11/arts/video-games/jazzpunk-video-game-commits-to-comedy.html?mcubz=3 [Accessed 10 Mar. 2018].

director Kevin Zuhn, is that the family is not antagonistic, albeit creating problems in Octodad's life. "They're Octodad's heart," discloses Zuhn.[224] What is at the core of Octodad's troubles are his demons and insecurities about his true self. By accepting to role-play a character (*the father*) within a character (*the octopus*), the player gets invested in Octodad's inner conflict.

The browser game *QWOP* (2008)[225] also subverts audience's expectations of how movement functions in video games. The player is in control of an olympic sprinter in an attempt to reach the finish line in record time. The game uses four keyboard buttons, Q, W, O, and P, to control the calves and thighs of the sprinter. Running does not require the use of directional controls, as the only thing that matters is propulsion-creating muscular tension in the correct parts of the leg. QWOP is almost impossible to control. Attempts in achieving movement that even remotely resembles running gait is maddening. The Olympian trips and stumbles like a toddler taking their first steps. Although the controls of QWOP can be mastered, the learning curve is nigh sadistic—the hyperrealism of the game ultimately converts into dysfunction. Nonetheless, the extremely low stakes and the subverted player expectations make a funny gag. In an interview for Wired magazine[226] the game's creator Bennett Foddy argue that if running in real life wasn't such a no-brainer, the players would not find it so hard in the game. The game's background music echoes the opening notes of *Vangelis'* "Chariots of Fire," but neither the track nor the gameplay manage to escape their opening loops. Reaching the finish line just sets the player back to the start—there is no podium nor celebrations. As Wired describes

224 Surette, T. (2014). Young Horses Games Interview II. [online] Geeks WorldWide. Available at: thegww.com/octofather-part-ii-young-horses-games-interview [Accessed 21 Aug. 2017].

225 Bennett Foddy. (2008). QWOP [Browser game]. Available at: www.foddy.net/Athletics.html [Accessed 10 Aug. 2017].

226 Benenson, F. (2011). Soul-Crushing Realism Is a Videogame Hit. [online] WIRED. Available at: www.wired.com/2011/07/st_alpha_videogames [Accessed 10 Mar. 2018].

it, QWOP is "soul-crushing, low-rewarding realism."

Communicating detailed information through game mechanics alone can be challenging. Both Octodad and QWOP take a risk in incorporating their central joke to their respective game mechanics. Koster (2013: 162)[227] argues that game systems are generally not very good at conveying specifics, only generalities. For humor delivery, gameplay—or the *abstract ludic artifact* as Koster refers to it—is better used as a vague premise rather than an elaborate joke distribution system. "A designer who wants to use game system design as an expressive medium must be like the painter and the musician and the writer, in that she must learn what the strengths of the medium are, and what messages are best conveyed by it," Koster speculates. Octodad, having realized this, keeps the comedy fresh with sufficient contextual variation. The awkwardly controlling character along with level design act as a set-up for the ensuing comedy. When the game asks the player to control Octodad through a narrow aisle surrounded by flower vases, there is a premonition that the scene is not going to go smoothly. The level design together with the ridiculous physics call to wreak havoc, but the players are expected to restrain themselves and act according to social norms. Quinn (2015)[228] proclaims that by coinciding level design with the beats and the rhythm of in-game jokes, the timing problem in comedic video games can be resolved.

Another example of level design being used as means to intertwine comedy and inner conflicts with gameplay is *Psychonauts* (2005)[229]. The game is about literally entering the minds of people, and helping them to battle their inner demons and

227 Koster, R. (2013). A Theory of Fun for Game Design. 2nd ed. Sebastopol, California: O'Reilly Media, p.162.

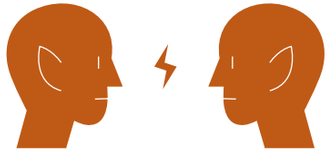
228 Quinn, Z. (2015). Comedy Games: An Underexplored Genre. Available at: www.gdcvault.com/play/1021867/Comedy-Games-An-Underexplored [Accessed 1 Jun. 2017].

229 Majesco Entertainment. (2005). Psychonauts. Windows.

overcoming their deepest fears. Each level reflects a person's inner world, and by exploring them the player learns more about their thoughts and emotions, what makes them scared and what do they hold dear. The characters, whose minds the player is able to enter range from a fallen actress whose head is stuck in an eternal theatrical play, to a paranoid security guard whose head is filled with secret agents and government conspiracies. Each level tells a funny, but insightful story about the character in question. The minds make up interesting level designs and provide genuine moments of hilarity. A lot of the information is communicated nonverbally through humorous occurrences and world details. The game is also careful not to make fun of either the characters or their mental health problems.

VI.II

Interpersonal Conflict Between Two or More Characters



Vorhaus (1994: 24)[230] describes the interpersonal conflict being a battle between two individuals. Usually one of the characters is comical, and another character contrasts it by being more serious of the two. The characters involved might compete for a shared

230 Vorhaus, J. (1994). The Comic Toolbox: How to Be Funny Even if You're Not. Beverly Hills, California: Silman-James Press, p.24.

desire, or simply cross paths and collide while pursuing their own separate goals. *Untitled Goose Game* (N.D.)[231] finds comicality in the colliding interests of two characters. The player controls a wayward goose whose only goal is to torment an unsuspecting groundskeeper trying to do his job. The setup reinforces the stereotype that geese are inexplicably mean animals. The player is assigned to do mischievous tasks: steal the groundskeeper's keys; throw his rake in the lake; and steal food and other accessories to organize a picnic. Greyson (2017)[232] describes the game as being more about creating setups than causing straightforward mischief. The goose's animations are amusingly true to nature: the bird realistically huffs and spreads its wings as a sign of aggression when the groundskeeper gets too close to it.

The interpersonal conflict is well-suited for communal comedy, where two ore more people are assigned roles with unambiguous objectives. Simply situating players in the same space creates a conflict between them. Such is the case with *Who's Your Daddy* (2015)[233], an asymmetrical multiplayer game about the stress of babysitting. One person plays a parent in a race against the clock to baby-proof a household, whereas the other player controls an infant in an attempt to drain their health to zero in any imaginable way. The goal of the father is to prevent the death of the suicidal baby by relocating hazardous objects out of the baby's reach, who in turn attempts to avoid the father's supervision, locking themselves inside heated ovens and swallowing batteries and shards of glass. The clueless father cannot pick the baby up but they can heal them by feeding them fruits or medicine. Following the end of the round, the players reverse their roles. Despite its macabre theme Who's Your Daddy is

231 House House (2018). [Tentative release date] Untitled Goose Game. Platforms no yet specified.

232 Grayson, N. (2017). The Asshole Goose Game Is Fun To Play. [online] Kotaku. Available at: kotaku.com/the-asshole-goose-game-is-fun-to-play-1820622256 [Accessed 10 Mar. 2018].

233 Evil Tortilla Games. (2015). Who's Your Daddy. Windows.

unmistakably a comedic production. The roughness of the visual presentation contributes to the funniness. The exaggerated character archetypes with silly-looking models and awkward animations—in addition to the ludicrousness of the unfolding catastrophe—make it clear that the game is not to be taken seriously. The game is hilarious because there is some truth in the setup. Vincent (2015)[234] describes the emotional core of the comedy: "Babysitting is a hard job because babies are irresponsible. They'll drink whatever's under the sink and stick forks in power outlets. It's not that they don't want to live, they just don't understand how life works." The game is genuinely funny, and by making the players active participants in the comedy-making, the the humor becomes almost perennial. The competitive setup supports the interpersonal conflict. The dumb baby and the doofus dad make a beautiful double act. A lot of the humor stems from existing stereotypes. The father who is left alone with his baby is profoundly incompetent, and the moronic baby is lacking any sense of self-preservation.

VI.II.I
STEREOTYPE THREAT

While Who's Your Daddy has fun with parenting stereotypes, it also normalizes its own setup as the status quo. Comedic stereotypes can be clever and insightful at best, but detrimental at worst. Studies have shown that negative stereotyping can lead a person or a group affirming the portrayal and start

234 Vincent, B. (2015). Keep Your Infant Son From Death in 'Who's Your Daddy'. [online] Motherboard. Available at: motherboard.vice.com/en_us/article/z43vew/keep-your-infant-son-from-death-in-whos-your-daddy [Accessed 16 Oct. 2017].

acting according to it.[235, 236] The bumbling dad stereotype, that the father reinforces, was originally a deliberate subversion of the earnest and responsible 1950s father trope,[237] but as time went on it became the new normal. The game's "Daddy" is the familiar doofus from many family sitcoms, but the exaggerated portrayal highlights real problems in parenting roles. The players are improvising actors, but the roles they are playing are fixed. One person always plays as the baby, and the other one as the father. The problem lies not only in what is portrayed, but also in what is left out. The game specifically highlights incompetent fatherhood, in preference over motherhood, as a comedic thing. Batti (2016)[238] condemns the game's failure to represent mothers as equally goofy parents. She points out that in western popular culture incompetent mothers are an archetype customarily depicted as evil, or even monstrous. The failure to portray a harmless clumsy mother figure is a missed opportunity from the game's part. The central joke of Who's Your Daddy is genuinely funny, which can make some of the underlying problems almost invisible. Defective stereotypes can be exposed by magnifying them, but when there is nothing to magnify, nothing can be fixed. Comedy is wonderful at pointing fingers, and comedic stereotyping—when executed correctly—can be used as a tool to raise awareness.

Humor and comedy have the capability to reframe unfunny phenomena humorous, and to change people's attitudes. Games

235 Steele, C. and Aronson, J. (1995). Stereotype Threat and the Intellectual Test Performance of African Americans. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 69(5), pp.797-811. Available at: users.nber.org/~sewp/events/2005.01.14/Bios+Links/Good-rec2-Steele_&_Aronson_95.pdf

236 Inzlicht, M. and Ben-Zeev, T. (2000). A Threatening Intellectual Environment: Why Females Are Susceptible to Experiencing Problem-Solving Deficits in the Presence of Males. Psychological Science, 11(5), pp.365-371. Available at: journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1111/1467-9280.00272

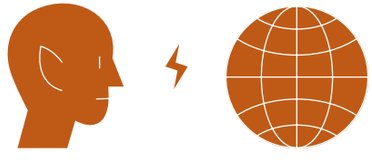
237 Tropp, L. and Kelly, J. (2016). Deconstructing Dads: Changing Images of Fathers in Popular Culture. London: Lexington Books. pp.3–20.

238 Batti, B. (2017). Who's Your (Bad) Daddy?: Or, The Problem with Representations of Incompetent Fatherhood. [online] Not Your Mama's Gamer. Available at: www.nymgamer.com/?p=12744 [Accessed 16 Oct. 2017].

can play a part in this. Salen and Zimmerman (2003: 504–514)[239] refer to a play that transforms its own cultural context as *transformative play*. They argue that nearly all play—similar to comedy—is transformative of culture. Game designers are influenced by the audience's preferences, and the audience is influenced by the game's portrayal of cultural phenomena. It could be argued that the person telling the joke is equally responsible for the joke told, as the audience is for laughing at it.

VI.III

Global Conflict Between a Character and a World



Global conflict refers to the dispute between characters and the world they inhabit. Vorhaus (2004: 22–23)[240] divides the global conflict into two scenarios: one where a normal character is part of a comical world; and another where a comical character is situated in a normal world. As video game worlds are all more or less fictional, the latter scenario is rare to come across. Creating a normal world requires restraint from the developers. Games

239 Salen, K., Zimmerman, E. (2003). Rules of Play. Massachusetts: The MIT Press. pp.504–514.

240 Vorhaus, J. (1994). The Comic Toolbox: How to Be Funny Even if You're Not. Beverly Hills, California: Silman-James Press, p.22–23.

like *Gang Beasts* (2017)[241], *The Sims* (2000)[242], or even the *Portal* (2007)[243], that accentuate comedic character interactions rather than the comicality of the world, could be counted as examples of such scenario. However, it could be argued that each of these games also contain a comical world, due to them deriving from real world norms.

Video games can only make very few and basic assumptions about the player controlling them, and as many games consider the player as a blank slate, making the world comical instead of the player character is easy to understand. When the player is regarded as normal, the world becomes the foil. To highlight the player's role as a neutral representation, games sometimes leave the player-controlled character without any dialogue. Dickinson (2012)[244] calls the silent protagonist character type a "digital equivalent of the tabula rasa," to which the player can imprint their own personality. The decision to not grant the playable character a voice is meant to make the player more immersed in the game world by melding the player's voice with the character's personality. From comedy's perspective, silent protagonist is a false straight man. Since the character type is not so much of a character, but more of a shell of one, it cannot be used to create a sufficient global conflict. The role of the straight man is generally not well-suited for the player, because it is the representation of the comedic focus normally reserved for the author. In some cases the straight man's observations alone can turn the production into a work of comedy. Remove the straight man sensibilities

241 Double Fine Productions. (2017). Gang Beasts. PlayStation 4.

242 Electronic Arts. (2000). The Sims. Windows.

243 Valve. (2007). Portal. Windows.

244 Dickinson, K. (2012). Does Silence Speak in the Loudest Voice? Misconceptions about Silent Protagonists in Video Games. [online] PopMatters. Available at: www.popmatters.com/148757-does-silence-speak-in-the-loudest-voice-in-video-games-2495949406.html [Accessed 22 Jan. 2018].

from Bill Murray's character in the film *Groundhog Day*[245], and the film's comedic tone will turn into horror. When there is no voice of reason, the whole world becomes a subject of absurd distortion.

VI.III.I
ABSURD WORLDS

Absurdity can be understood as a conflict between a normal observer and a comical world and its comical characters. The humor is for the audience to decipher. Absurdity does not need a voice of reason because it is the audience who reflects the absurdity to their own sense of normality. Absurd humor encapsulates what has been said to concern all humor. It is a "holiday from the constraints of reason and logic," as Lippitt (1991: 72)[246] describes it. It is a celebration of the surreal condition of our existence, which makes it a good fit for the fictive mold of video games. The absurdist movement declares that all of our strives to find explanation to our existence are subject to fail, or they are impossible to be detected. Albert Camus, one of the leading figures of the movement, depicts absurdism as an honoring of our meaningless state of being. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942: 21–48)[247] Camus comes to the conclusion that our two options in life are either to commit a philosophical suicide, to take a leap of faith in spite of empirical evidence, or to realize that human existence lacks any discernible meaning. The latter option, according to Camus, either leads to the acceptance of our absurd existence, or to an existential crisis

245 Groundhog Day. (1993). [film] Directed by Ramis, H. USA: Columbia Pictures.

246 Lippitt, J. (1991). Philosophical Perspectives on Humour and Laughter. Master's Thesis. University of Durham, p.72.

247 Camus, A. (1942) and O'Brien, J. (1955). The Myth of Sisyphus, and Other Essays. New York: Vintage Books, pp.21–48.

that ultimately leads the person taking their own life. Absurd comedy is a deliberate fallacy of logic and reason. It is an attempt to liberate the audience from the logic that is desperately trying to find meaning in reality. With its aim in renouncing meaning, the examination of absurd humor is at best interpretive. It does not correspond to rationale because the cause and the effect of its non sequitur humor are inexplicable or broken.

Katamari Damacy (2004)[248] is a portrayal of an interactive absurdist world. The storyline concerns a celestial little prince reconstructing the cosmos after his father, the flamboyant King of All Cosmos, had accidentally destroyed it while playing tennis. The re-assembling of the stars and the planets happens as the player rolls around a spherical object called *Katamari* that sticks any colliding objects to its surface. The rebuilding starts from miniature scale. At the beginning the player is able to attach only small items, such as coins and butterflies to the Katamari. As they keep on rolling, the snowballing sphere allows increasingly larger objects to stick to its surface, such as stadiums, islands, and even rainbows. Brendan Main of Escapist (2009)[249] writes that the game's punchline is the "entire digital world taken to its inevitable conclusion." Making everything in the world a collectible, Katamari Damacy exposes the video game industry's fixation with compulsive hoarding. True to the absurdist fashion, the game diminishes the human situation by depicting people as homogeneous objects, indistinguishable from any other object in the world. They are just another fragment of the cosmos for the player to collect. Katamari Damacy pans out like a reimagined genesis story, but a one that is utterly disinterested in the role of humans.

248 Namco. (2004). Katamari Damacy. Playstation 2.

249 Main, B. (2009). Katamari Absurdity. [online] The Escapist. Available at: www.escapistmagazine.com/articles/view/video-games/issues/issue_220/6554-Katamari-Absurdity.3 [Accessed 30 Aug. 2017].

Evans (2014)[250] proposes Katamari Damacy as the 21st century rendition of the works of *Theatre of the Absurd*, a dramatist movement in the 1950s that followed the ideas of Albert Camus. Evans considers the game displaying absurd attitudes of post-modern pop-culture in a similar fashion that the Theatre of the Absurd illustrated the absurdity of post-war existence. Certainly, Katamari Damacy shares semblance with the movement's screenplays in many ways: repetition is fetishized; the laws of physics are casually violated; and the extravagant cast, both in appearance and motivations, are out of sync with the world—or universe—that they inhabit. Evans, however, also highlights the dissimilarities that the game has with the Theatre of Absurd: "While the objects and settings presented in the world of Katamari do not fit together in a verisimilar reality, they do not destroy a sense of reality altogether." The cosmos of Katamari Damacy is a strange but not completely inharmonious realm. The scenes are played in chronological order and the world is build on a comprehensible, although turbulent, inner logic.

Frog Fractions (2012)[251] challenges game design conventions by making its gameplay non sequitur. Frog Fractions presents itself as a simple edutainment browser game that wishes to educate the player about mathematical fractions. The player controls a frog on a lily pad trying to catch insects with its tongue. The score is displayed in fractions, but the lesson about them remains unclear. The nature of the game changes drastically as the player gains access to power-ups. Upon obtaining a dragon power-up with the ability to warp-drive, the player finds themselves flying through outer space, landing on Mars—now colonized by bugs—and navigating its underwater caves while listening to a narration

250 Evans, C. (2014). The Brechtian, Absurdist, and Poor Video Game: Alternative Theatrical Models of Software-based Experience. [online] Journal of Games Criticism. Available at: gamescriticism.org/articles/evans-1-2/ [Accessed 31 Aug. 2017].

251 Twinbeard Studios. (2012). Frog Fractions [Browser game]. Available at: twinbeard.com/frog-fractions [Accessed 31 Mar. 2018].

about the history of boxing. On Mars the Frog gets prosecuted in bug court, runs for President and ultimately gets involved in bug pornography business. Frog Fractions is a collection of gameplay styles. The styles fluctuates from a space shoot 'em up, to a courtroom simulator, to a text adventure, to a rhythm action game. It is unabridged absurdity in video game format—a circus that subverts the audience's expectations to the most fundamental degree. With its constantly shifting focus and the absence of gameplay loops, the game jests at the game industry's attempts to institutionalize certain design practices. While unconventional, it is hard to argue that Frog Fractions is badly designed because the execution of its premise works so well.

To achieve true absurdity, game designers need to acknowledge the existing absurdity of game design conventions. According to Koster (2013: 148)[252] the basic intent of games is to create a "symbolic logic set that conveys meaning." Majority of the conventions are decisions based on traditions. They either mimic and reshape life's actual mechanisms, or create new abstractions that condition the player to learn the ways of the game. Healing a bullet wound with pain killers or stealing goods from every house in a village is doubtlessly absurd conduct, yet it is never addressed by any game. Such blind spots create unaddressed absurdist conflicts, where the player recognizes absurdity in something the designers consider as normal. Video game logic is an agreement between the player and the game, and submitting to it is accepting the absurdist reality of the game. Absurd comedy can estrange the audience from design conventions. It can make the audience question the fundamentals of game design by acknowledging and addressing the conflict between a symbol and its meaning.

252 Koster, R. (2013). A Theory of Fun for Game Design. 2nd ed. Sebastopol, California: O'Reilly Media, p.148.

VII

Case Studies

As stated in the Introduction of this thesis, the genre of ludonarrative comedy is rarely recognized and discussed, albeit there being plenty of humorous games to warrant the classification. This section is a close examination of three video games recognized for their comedic value. The games in question, *Grim Fandango* (1998)[253], *Portal 2* (2011)[254], and *The Sims* series (2000–)[255], are chosen for this dissection for their distinct approaches to ludonarrative humor, and for how they each resolve the problem of interactive comic timing. Grim Fandango represents classical comedy writing, drawing heavy influence from cinema, stand-up comedy and other forms of auterial entertainment. Portal 2, featuring a similarly linear story progression, highlights the player agency by never taking the controls away from the player. The Sims series, in contrast to the pre-written comedy of both Grim Fandango and Portal 2, grants the player more freedom to craft their own emergent stories and comedic narratives. This chapter aims to study the strengths and the shortcomings of these comedic, interactive storytelling methods.

253 LucasArts. (1998). Grim Fandango. Windows.

254 Valve. (2011). Portal 2. Windows.

255 Electronic Arts. (2000–). The Sims. Windows.

VII.I

Grim Fandango

EMBEDDED COMEDY — EMERGENT COMEDY

THE MAIN COMICAL CONFLICT

Global confclit: Normal character (Manny) stuck in a crazy world

SIGNIFICANT COMIC ENHANCER

Straight man: The player/protagonist observes and makes witty remarks.

Comedian Chris Rock has once said[256] that "comedy is the blues for people who can't sing." Rest assured, some of the best comedians are masters in spinning tragedy into hilarity. Humor can function as a filter that takes "the scary" away from intimidating matters such as self doubt, sickness, and even death. Although it appears that tragedy and comedy are polar opposites, comedy often stems from misery. They can be viewed as two different ways of reacting to the same event. Comedy provides an outlook that allows the audience to laugh at incidents, which under other conditions would be devastating. "My dad died doing what he did best: growing tumors," jokes Laurie Kilmartin in her comedy special *45 Jokes About My Dead Dad*.[257] Death is scary but when one can joke about the issue, it becomes less scary—at least momentarily. There is anecdotal evidence supporting the

256 Rock, C. (1993). Rock in a Hard Place: Comedy Is a Lot Like Roulette—Always Bet on Black. Spin Magazine, [online] (2), p.24.

257 Kilmartin, L. (2017). 45 Jokes About My Dead Dad. [Standup Comedy Special [audio recording] Aspecialthing Records.

often repeated claim that humor has a therapeutic function. It can be a pivotal tool for coping (MARTIN: 339–341)[258]. Much like the blues, it can be a way of expressing grief and dark thoughts with the help of emotional estrangement that comes with it.

Grim Fandango, the graphic adventure game released in 1998 by LucasArts, combines blues and comedy into a dead-pan film noir piece that laughs with the death, as opposed to in the face of it. Regardless of the fact that the playable character, Manuel "Manny" Calavera himself is the face of the death, the grim reaper. Manny is employed by the *Department of Death, Bureau of Acquisitions*—making him effectively a bureaucrat. Not even death, it appears, can part a person from a government job. The game is set in a state between life and death—called the *Land of the Dead*, or the *Eighth Underworld*—where humans have managed to only drag their bones from their previous lives. Everyone is a skeleton, sans a handful of elemental demons that are summoned to keep the city running by doing blue collar work. In addition to reaping the dead, Manny is required to sell the newly dead travel packages into the *Ninth underworld*. It is the eventual aspiration, the promised higher plane of existence for the in-betweeners stuck in the Land of the Death. The better lives they have led, the better travel packages they are entitled. A life faultlessly led grants a person a ticket to the Number Nine train that shoots them directly into the Ninth Underworld in minutes, whereas it takes years for sinful persons to get there, as they are not qualified for anything better than a walking cane. The story of Grim Fandango commences when Manny starts investigating why he is receiving all the second-rate clients, but his colleague is hitting all the jackpots. Before long, Manny finds himself falling in love with a client, Meche, and gets tangled in a web of corruption far bigger than he could have anticipated.

258 Martin, R. (2006). The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach. 1st ed. Amsterdam: Elsevier Academic Press, p.339–341.

What starts out as a detective story develops into a thoughtful exploration of what does being dead mean.

The game is split into four years that each denote an opening for a new act. Each year starts on the same day, the Mexican holiday *Día de los Muertos*, or the Day of the Dead, from which the game also takes visual cues. The four years that pass by make profound character development possible, but the year transitions also play out like a running gag. Every time after "a year later" text scrolls on the screen," Manny is shown to have turned his life around and done inexplicably good for himself. Within a year, he will transform the quiet port of Rubacava into a blooming gambling town. On another year he infiltrates a cruise ship to get across an ocean, and by the end of it he has become the captain of the ship. The four year span, and the diverse locales that pass by make Grim Fandango feel like a game equivalent of a road movie.

VII.1.1
WHAT'S THE DEAL WITH THE DEAD ?

Comedy is an integral element of the gameplay in Grim Fandango and not just a coat of paint. The game is filled with jokes and in-game banter, but they are just one part of the playful logic that runs through the world. Grim fandango is an adventure games with an emphasis on logic puzzles, and the majority of them require the player to think comedically. In one puzzle the player needs to jam a pneumatic tube system with balloons filled with packaging foam. Another puzzle requires the player to put out a colony of flaming demon beavers with a fire extinguisher. As Manny's comedic mind is the key to many of the game's puzzles, the player gains a better understanding of the world and its rules by tuning themselves into the humorous frequency that many of the solutions require. However, sometimes the game expects the player to think too absurdly, yet not just any absurd solution will qualify as an answer. A person playing the game is expected to accept Grim Fandango's inner logic and mechanics. The player might have a funny solution in mind, but if it is not what the game expects, the solution will not qualify. This sort of specific logic, that is characteristic of most adventure games made in the 90's, is not exactly reactive to the players actions or their sense of humor. Grim Fandango takes an authorial approach to comedy by not letting the audience to dictate the show.

The gameplay is reminiscent of old point and click adventure games where the aim is to collect items, explore scenes, and collect various clues. In order to proceed the player is required to find logical connections between the items and the environments. However, there is no pointing or clicking in Grim Fandango. The game uses directional controls for movement instead of mouse-based navigation of earlier adventure games. Apart from the conversation options, a traditional user interface is absent. Grim Fandango's writer-director Tim Schafer describes (2014)[259] the team's approach to minimalist interface elements with the following words: "In a normal interface the cursor is a metaphor of your attention point, where you're looking at and a highlight of cursor is a metaphor for 'this is interesting' [...] verbs will come up for what you're thinking about doing to the object. We wanted everything to be just literal. When you're walking around, instead of highlighting things in a room, he [Manny] actually looks at the thing." Grim Fandango uses head tracking as a subtle hint system but not everything Manny sets his eyes on is useful for the progression. Sometimes he just wants to tell a joke about some detail in a scene. With a press of a button, Manny tells the player how he feels about the point of interest. Head tracking—combined with Manny's amusing remarks about his

259 DoubleFineProd (2014). Tim Schafer Plays "Grim Fandango": Part 1. [video] Available at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=d3IidGmVLo4 [Accessed 10 Mar. 2018].

surroundings—reframe the game's stylish scenes as humorous. The pause between Manny's stare, and the player-triggered line is perfect use of interactive comic timing. The dramatic pause creates an illusion that Manny is musing on funny things to say. It creates a unique comedic point of view. Almost every line is witty, or at least appropriate to the moment. Manny is akin to an observational stand-up comedian working on his material. Upon examining a card deck in his office, Manny comments: "This deck of cards is a little frayed around the edges. Then again, so am I, and I've got fewer suits." The player points a finger at a subject and Manny expresses his snarky, humorous opinion about it, almost breaking the fourth wall by talking indirectly to the audience. The humor is earnest and observant. Although Manny constantly cracks jokes, within them he expresses his sincere thoughts and feelings. Manny's sharp but subdued humor does not detach him from the story, or make him seem disinterested. Rather, it makes his character seem self-confident and adaptive to any new circumstance.

The game blends classical film noir influences with Mexican folklore. Thematically and aesthetically Grim Fandango is inspired by noir classics such as *Chinatown*[260], *Casablanca*[261] and *Brazil*[262]. Its visual style also borrows imagery from Mayan and Aztec cultures in addition to Mexican mythology. Despite drawing heavy influences from film noir and other cinema, the game never gets encumbered by them. Grim Fandango is a cultural cocktail that stands on its own. The characters resemble decorative *paper-mâché skulls*, calaveras, that are used in the celebration of the Day of the Dead festivities (hence the name Manuel Calavera). Although the game suffers from the limitations of early 3D-graphics, it does not

260 Chinatown. (2018). [film] Directed by Polanski, R. USA: Paramount-Penthouse.

261 Casablanca. (1942). [film] Directed by Curtiz, M. USA: Warner Bros.

262 Brazil. (1985). [film] Directed by Gilliam, T. Embassy International Pictures.

attempt to hide its birthmark. The coarse presentation benefit the the comedy. The chopped character models and simplified facial animations direct the player's focus towards the story and dialogue. The intertextuality also extends to the characterization of the game's cast. From the first encounter, the characters appear familiar, as their roles are a reiteration from a manifold of old movies and television shows. Villains act in a villainous manner and friends transmit a feeling of warmth.

Early on in the game, Manny consorts with a gentle demon, Glottis, who is bound to become his trusted sidekick, accompanying him throughout the adventure. Glottis and Manny form a buddy comedy duo, where Glottis plays the role of the comic relief and Manny is the businesslike straight man. Glottis is a lovable orange lump, a big child who blindly trusts his friend whom he considers his superior. Although Manny and Glottis become devoted friends who enjoy each other's company, Manny tends to use Glottis' kindness to his advantage. Upon meeting him, Manny sweet talks Glottis to leave his job as a mechanic to be his designated driver. As a result Glottis gets fired by the Department of Dead and falls into depression. He laments how it feels like having his heart ripped out and have it thrown into the woods, while simultaneously replicating the metaphor by actu throwing his heart into the woods. Manny's dry sense of humor and deadpan delivery is contrasted with the slapstick of Glottis. The game features a large cast of characters, who are all interesting and feel like a natural part of the game. Same goes for the whole realm of the game. Land of the Dead feels like a factual place with a purposed history, even if the player only gets to see a small portion of it. The world operates with a different set of rules from ours, but the developers seem to have a good grasp of how every element in it operates.

Resorting to the so-called *rule of funny*[263], which states that a humorous outcome entitles neglect of continuity, science or rationale, Grim Fandango dances its way out of otherwise apparent inconsistencies. Manny's ability to inhale cigarette smoke and talk, indicates that his rib-cage still contains lungs. Yet when it is advantageous to the narrative, Manny has the ability to survive underwater. From time to time the game sheds light on its own physics violations, and can gets momentarily introspective about them for the sake of yet more jokes. When Manny inquires the old seafarer Velasco what lies behind his eyepatch, because no skeleton in the world has eyes, he replies: "When I was alive I had an eyepatch like this. This one's just for the phantom pain... and that one eye socket used to scream like a banshee when the trade winds blew, so I plugged her." Grim Fandango is filled with comparable quips about relics indigenous from the world of living that capitalize on the rule of funny. Although the rule of funny can compromise the consistency of a fictional world, in Grim Fandango it is utilized to convey small but important details about the game's world or characters. Upon crossing a dam composed of human bones, Glottis and Manny share the following conversation:

GLOTTIS Manny, I don't know if I like driving over people.
MANNY They can't feel it. They're dead.
GLOTTIS You're dead, and I wouldn't wanna drive over you.
MANNY That's because you and I Glottis... Are friends.

The ethical concern that Glottis expresses is brushed aside by a funny remark by Manny. Details about the world and its principles are substituted for kind-hearted frolic that embraces the character interaction and their relationship with each other. It is

263 TV Tropes. (n.d.). Rule of Funny. [online] Available at: tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/RuleOfFunny [Accessed 10 Mar. 2018].

a common theme throughout the game, as if the game knowingly aims to conceal major pieces of information about its fiction, exposing merely a carefully chosen fragment of it to the audience.

Grim Fandango uses the sharp contrast between life and death as a source for many of its jokes. In the port town of Rubacava where Manny spends the second year of his journey, the sailors are re-inking their arms since their old tattoos got disposed with their skin. The humor is natively dark—everyone is dead after all—but the game's melancholy never dims its buoyancy. With every turn the player is reminded that death is a lens through which life is examined. Under its bluesy hood, Grim Fandango is an optimistic, even romanticized take on death. The comedy is so dark that it becomes almost poetic.

HECTOR Oh Manny... so cynical... What happened to you, Manny, that caused you to lose your sense of hope, your love of life?
MANNY I died.

The people of The Land of the Dead show little emotion. They cannot smile since they have no facial muscles. No skin. No lips. Their bony faces can only reveal a toothy grin that exposes the emotional numbness molded by their previous struggles. Although the dead in Grim Fandango parade in the streets, gamble in casinos, and toast with cocktails in expensive lounge bars, they seem to go through these motions without joy, for the sake of not forgetting what it was like being a human. Manny might be equally sad about his past and hopeless about his future as the other lost souls in the world, but he at least cares about the people around him. And because he cares, there is a constant feeling that he has things to lose would he happen to fail. There is a lingering sensation that even if he has given up on a lot of things, there is still a whiff of righteousness, and to a lesser extent, eccentricity left in him that drives him forward. Through his character the game establishes its optimistic tone.

VII.I.II

DEATHS AND DEAD ENDS

Guns are an obligatory element in any noir story, but in a world where everybody is already dead, they demand some adjustments. The dead cannot be killed in traditional ways. However a person can get *sprouted* with a dart gun, which will make them start decomposing at a rapid pace, with flowers pushing from the gun wound. It is a visual pun—a literal interpretation of the saying *life conquers death*. The game's puzzle document [264] describes a sprouting scene in the opening chapter of the game with the following words:

> Hector shoots Copal with a sprouting gun, the flowery dart sticking in Don's sternum. Green veins spread out from the dart with a horrible stretching noise, and as Don screams, his body bursts out in a sickening bouquet of floral agony.

The floral scent of life in the Land of the Dead is a bad omen, and during the course of the journey the player becomes suspicious whenever flowers are present. However, the player is never in true danger as it is impossible for Manny to die in the game.

Because the player does not have to worry about Manny's wellbeing, the comedy becomes more enjoyable. The exclusion of the *death penalty* means that the game never triggers the fight-or-flight response in the player. Death as a punishment mechanism draws from our own fear of passing, but adventure games appeal to another human anxiety, being stuck. In many occasions, the

264 Chan, P., Ingerson, E., Mogilefsky, B., Schafer, T. and Tsacle, P. (1996). Grim Fandango Puzzle Document. LucasArts, p.16. Available at: gameshelf.jmac.org/2008/11/13/GrimPuzzleDoc_small.pdf. [Accessed 10 Mar. 2018].

There is nothing more horrifying than flowers: A logo on the side of the game's *Sproutella* pistol.

dead-end punishment can feel even harsher than death itself, since a video game death is rarely the true end, but merely a slap on the wrist. Being stuck however does not grant the player another try. They are stuck feeling dumb until they figure their way out. The hints given by the game are often vague and the puzzles can be exceedingly difficult to solve. Nonetheless, being stuck in a game that is basically a metaphor for Limbo deserves credit for the symbolic value alone.

Either kill the player or the momentum. Neither of the two approaches are good for comedy, as irritation and the feeling of mirth exclude each other. Failing and getting punished is not funny, yet neither is getting locked inside a room. The topic of discussion comes back to the problem of comic timing. Comedy repels interruptions. It needs to flow, and a way to achieve this is to ease the audience's frustration. Comedic video games are usually low on the difficulty scale but Grim Fandango is an exception. Some of the puzzles are abstruse at times, but the game's charm manages to overcome some of its shortcomings.

One of the key gameplay elements of Grim Fandango is its conversation system. The human (*or skeleton*) interaction is structured much like any other puzzle in the game. Rodkin (KOTZER, 2015) [265] describes the role of the player in Grim Fandango as the

265 Kotzer, Z. (2015). 'Grim Fandango': The Game About the Dead That Refused to Die. [online] Motherboard. Available at: motherboard.vice.com/en_us/article/mgbkev/grim-fandango-a-game-about-the-dead-refused-to-die [Accessed 19 Dec. 2017].

playable character's conscience, "the voice over their shoulder." The player is presented with multiple sentences from which they are subject to select the most fitting response. There is usually a one key line that advances the plot forwards, but oftentimes the player just wants to chat for the joy of conversing. The dialogue tree is nothing new in the adventure game genre, but Grim Fandango excels in making every conversation seem funny and meaningful, without them ever getting too verbose. The conversations are a layer of puzzles on top of the actual puzzle solving. By engaging in these exchanges, the player learns the language of the game world.

A well-crafted dialogue tree enables branching dialogue and lets the player insert a part of themselves into the playable character's persona. An uninspired dialogue tree, however, can steer the conversation too heavily to the direction that the game wants. When the dialogue does not correspond to the player's internal monologue, it can make them feel like they are not in control of the exchange. Grim Fandango overcomes the inner voice-dilemma with the quality of its writing. The writers have come up with multiple equally satisfying responses to a single line. Manny—being a salesman—is an intelligent and persuasive character. His smooth-talking persona is reflected in conversations, as nearly every line choice is either smart or funny, making the player feel the same way. He sweet talks to get what he wants, and impresses with his wit, but also listens and wants to learn. By the benefit of playing the role of a guile salesman, the player is expected to socially engineer their way from a stalemate to another. Manny makes deals with people. He gives them what they want to get something he wants from them in return. He plays dirty tricks when necessary, beguiling his enemies and sometimes even his companions.

Unlike in more recent adventure games, the player does not make particularly hard decisions. The ramifications to the words chosen remain the same from playthrough to playthrough. The

decisions always lead to the same outcomes. The branches in the narrative offer rhetorical variation instead of letting the player rewrite the story. The comedy is not emergent nor coincidental, but rather scripted to the finest detail. The game wants to tell the player a specific, predefined story where the player choices are by and large stylistic. In many ways Grim Fandango is written like an interactive book—it lives and dies by its writing.

VII.I.III
CONVERTING TRAGEDY INTO VIGOR

As much as the player is exposed to the ongoings of the Land of The Dead, the fascination towards the game world comes from the many mysteries surrounding it. The Introduction in the printed manual for the game has a passage in it: "For those who are disturbed by the amount of smoking in Grim Fandango, we offer two reasons: 1) we wanted to be true to the film noir atmosphere, and 2) everybody in the game who smokes is DEAD."[266] It is a joke among others, but what makes it interesting is that it is one of the few instances in the game that reveals anything about thepeoples' past lives. The game deliberately conceals information about how its characters passed away, and what they did during their *fat days*—as life is referred to in the game. All that is known of Manny's past is that he works as a grim reaper to pay his dues to the mysterious "powers that be." Those who have led a good life are not spending long periods of time in Land of the Dead. They get direct access to afterlife. The characters encountered—and even Manny himself—have done something shameful in their past lives, yet the game does not elaborate further. The world of Grim Fandango is filled with people who

266 Grim Fandango Travel Guide & Instruction Manual. (1998). 1st ed. LucasArts, p.5. Available at: www.mocagh.org/lucasfilm/grimfandango-manual.pdf. [Accessed 10 Mar. 2018].

are no better than depraved sinners at best and malignant crooks at worst—but to their defense they make an interesting cast.

The majority of the game's humor comes, as Irwin (2015)[267] describes it, from an "honest assessment of its world." Jokes do not feel forced because they come from the reality of the moment. The game starts from an office setting where Manny is punching the clock. Death is mundane, even boring. The comedic contrast between humdrum and otherworldly is transmitted to the audience through the environments and in the jokes. The skeletal state of the inhabitants of Land of the Dead is constantly at the centre of ridicule. "Is it hard to kiss up to the boss so much when you got no lips," Manny insults his colleague and archenemy, Domino, in an office that once belonged to him. The game knows when not to be funny and there are genuine sad moments to contrast the comedy. It is this contrast that makes the funny moments shine even more and make this strange realm seem like a real place. The pacing is deliberate and the movement feels natural. Scenes take their time and the characters are always central to them, giving weight to their movement and words. Although the world is foreign and fantastical, Grim Fandango wants the player to feel themselves as a natural part of its world.

As the player guides Manny through his four year passage, the world around him goes through changes. The transitions between years expose the reshaping of the environments. Corruption—that is a central element in the story—comes in the form of neon lights and golden statues. The more dazzling the environments get, the sadder the people in the game world seem. The port town of Rubacava gets transformed into a blooming gambling hub. Manny, being part of the town's metamorphosis, nearly loses himself in its smokey casinos, forgetting that he himself was once fighting against this kind of greed. Land of the

267 Irwin, J. (2015). Long Live Grim Fandango. [online] Longreads. Available at: longreads.com/2015/01/29/long-live-grim-fandango [Accessed 19 Dec. 2017].

Dead becomes more and more secular as the story progresses, slowly shifting into debauchery. In the finale of the game, Manny cuts off the supply chain that has been thieving and dealing tickets to the Number Nine train and finally himself finds a golden ticket with his own name on it.

The credits roll as Manny and Meche cross the final border to the Ninth Underworld, but not a glimpse of the great beyond is shown. The Ninth Underworld represents the endpoint for anguish and malice, both predominant themes in the game. They form the comedic epicenter of Grim Fandango—pain filtered through humor. The prevailing sadness that is felt throughout the game is always diluted with humor. It manifests as entertainment for the player, but for the people stuck in the world, it is the shimmer of hope in their plight. The story comes to an end at a point where humor stops being. "The secret source of Humor itself is not joy but sorrow," Mark Twain writes in *Following the Equator*[268], and concludes. "There is no humor in heaven."

268 Twain, M. (2008). Following the Equator: Reprint Edition. Stilwell, Kansas: Digireads Publishing, p.59.

VII.II

Portal 2

EMBEDDED COMEDY — EMERGENT COMEDY

THE MAIN COMICAL CONFLICT

Interpersonal conflict between two wills with deeply conflicting objectives (Chell and GladOs).

SIGNIFICANT COMIC ENHANCER

Comedic aggression: The game is constantly humorously insulting the player character for their performance.

The first-person puzzle platforming game, Portal 2, is a fine example of how gameplay and comedic narrative can complement each other. Identically to how Grim Fandango was the final major adventure game for LucasArts, Portal 2 marked the end of an era for Valve's story driven single-player games. As the title implies, Portal 2 is a sequel to Portal, released 4 years prior. Both Portal and Portal 2—as one might reckon—deal with portals. In Portal, the player acquires a gun that has the ability to spawn teleportational wormholes on surfaces to bind unconnected points in space-time together. One portal for entrance and another one to exit. The gimmick sounds simple but leads to mind-bending puzzles.

VII.II.I

COMEDY IS A PERFORMANCE

In the first Portal game the player finds themselves inside a gigantic research facility, Aperture Science, solving roomfuls of consecutive puzzles with the portal gun. The player adopts the role of Chell, a woman trapped inside the facility. In the beginning of the game she wakes up in small windowless vault with no recollection of how she got there. The sole other presence in the game is an overseeing computational female voice, GladOs. She guides Chell through stages of the research center, where she is held as an apparent test subject. The guiding voice bears semblance to Apple's AI assistant *Siri* with its similar tone of voice and wry attitude, but as the player progresses and the puzzle rooms get more vicious, the way GladOs talks to the player changes. What starts as slightly sarcastic public service announcements, turn into manipulative and threatening remarks about the player's performance. The AI's attempts to belittle Chell are what makes the game so funny. When GladOs notices that the player has a free will, it starts antagonizing Chell. Throughout the game GladOs attempts to find weaknesses in Chell's character and tries to break her morale. The unstable AI obsessed with experimentation, combined with barren observation rooms, paint a sinister picture. The game deceives the player into thinking that it is just a simple puzzle game, but soon it becomes clear that the story is actually about overcoming the corrupted artificial intelligence and escaping the diabolical complex. GladOs is an unreliable narrator whose credibility as an objective storyteller is compromised, when the game converts the narrator into an active character in the story arc. The first Portal is concise and well written, like an elaborate long-form joke that has a satisfying twist in the end.

Sequels to comedy movies often come across as a dubious way for the studio to generate revenue with little effort and recycled ideas, but Portal 2 manages to turn its predecessor's clever premise into a fully fletched comedy. The story continues from the ever so ramshackled Aperture Science facility, from which Chell had failed to escape at the end of the first game. While still starring Chell as the main character, Portal 2 introduces a new subordinate character voiced by Stephen Merchant, Wheatley—a small robotic sphere who pledges to help the player escape the facility once and for all. Contrary to Chell's silent character, Wheatley babbles a lot. The game constantly jokes about the player's limited capacity to interact with its world through Wheatley's observations of the player's actions. Throughout the game he suspects that Cell has a minor brain damage, since all she does is jump around and never responds even when being directly addressed. Wheatley reacts appropriately when the player does something unexpected but also when they ignore something that the game expects them to notice. In the scene where Wheatley is introduced, the robot is stuck behind a door, knocking on it perpetually and urging for the player to open it for him. Upon the player staying passive and declining to open the door immediately, Wheatley starts to get a little desperate with his persuasion.

WHEATLEY Hello? Anyone in there?
WHEATLEY Helloooo?
WHEATLEY Are you going to open the door? At any time?
WHEATLEY Hello? Can y—no?
WHEATLEY Are you going to open this door? Because it's fairly urgent.
WHEATLEY Oh, just open the door!
WHEATLEY [TO SELF] That's too aggressive.
WHEATLEY [LOUD AGAIN] *Hello, friend!* Why not open the door?
WHEATLEY [TO SELF] Hmm. Could be Spanish, could be Spanish...
WHEATLEY [LOUD AGAIN] *¡Hola, amigo, Abre la puerta! Donde esta* —no. Um...

WHEATLEY Fine! No, absolutely fine. It's not like I don't have, you know, TEN THOUSAND other test subjects begging me to help them escape. You know, it's not like this place is ABOUT TO EXPLODE!
WHEATLEY Alright, look, okay, I'll be honest.
WHEATLEY You're the last test subject left. And if you don't help me, we're both going to die.
WHEATLEY Alright? I didn't want to say it, you dragged it out of me. Alright?
WHEATLEY Dead. *Dos Muerte.*

The player could open the door at any point during Wheatley's rant, but by not doing so they are contributing to the comicality of the scene. The trick is simple but effective and makes the player feel involved in the conversation—that in fact is nothing more than monologue. By substituting dialogue to lines of monologue, the game is able to avoid the problem of comic timing. Because there are awkward pauses and no cuts in the gameplay, the comedy has a flow to it. Due to the game being a first person shooter, the camera is always directly controlled by the player. There are no narrative gaps because there are no cuts.

The cast of Portal 2 is modest in size, due to confinement being a prevalent theme. The quality of performances is important because the plot mainly unfolds through the characters' lines. Besides Wheatley, GladOs is reintroduced as the antagonist, who now desires to revenge for Chell's attempts on killing her in the first game. As the player digs deeper into Aperture Science's depths, they uncover its history of using humans as lab rats in deadly experiments. The player gets familiar with Cave Johnson, Aperture Science's founder, voiced by J. K. Simmons. His audio recordings guide the player through the abandoned, more experimental sections in the game. The performances by Simmons, Merchant, as well as the returning Ellen McLain as GladOs, steal the spotlight, and make the oppressive world feel strangely

enjoyable. Initially the characters come across as recognizable stereotypes: Wheatley is a well-meaning simpleton; Cave Johnson a manic science industrialist; and GladOs a spiteful matriarch, bearing striking resemblance to the television series Arrested Development's[269] Lucille Bluth. In due course the game subverts their archetypical roles, as the cast's motivations and actions fluctuate. The dreary world, along with Chell's mute character, act as a foil to the buffoonery of the other characters. According to the game's writer, Erik Wolpaw, the outcome is very much intended (AGNELLO, 2012)[270]. "You-slash-Chell [the player] are the straight man," he affirms and goes on to explain how the muteness of the protagonist works in the favor of comedy: "Having people stand around while you talk is tough in games, so if we can actually remove one whole character's dialogue, that saves us a bunch of time for all the other characters."

VII.II.II
THE THEMATIC FRAMEWORK

There has been discord whether or not Portal 2 is a work of comedy, since its world is so bleak and melodramatic[271]. From the beginning stages of development, Portal 2 was outlined to be a comedic production. "That was a given straight from the beginning. Portal 2 would be comedic. That was an axiomatic concept when we started designing," emphasizes Wolpaw.[272] The dystopian setting, along with the first-person shooter controls,

269 Arrested Development. (2003–2013). Fox (2003–06), Netflix (2013–)

270 Agnello, A. (2012). Funny People: Erik Wolpaw, Portal 2 Head Writer. [online] Gameological. Available at: gameological.com/2012/07/interview-erik-wolpaw-portal-2-head-writer [Accessed 28 Jun. 2017].

271 Davis, N. (2013). Can a Video Game Ever Be a True Comedy?. [online] Splitsider. Available at: splitsider.com/2013/03/can-a-video-game-ever-be-a-true-comedy [Accessed 15 Jun. 2017].

272 Agnello, A. (2012). Funny People: Erik Wolpaw, Portal 2 Head Writer. [online] Gameological. Available at: gameological.com/2012/07/interview-erik-wolpaw-portal-2-head-writer [Accessed 28 Jun. 2017].

are used to overturn audience's conjecture of the state of affairs. In this regard Portal 2 is also a good example of the global conflict, where comical characters are situated in a normal world. As discussed earlier, comedy is the way matters are considered—it depends on the point of view. Things might seem bad, but there is humor to be found in the despair of the situation. The twists are unexpected, even though the premises for them are often hidden in plain sight. Sometimes they are merely small gags. At one point Wheatley asks the player to catch him when he is about to disengage from the management rail in the ceiling. He counts to three but nervously backs off in the last second, only to suddenly deciding to let go. As a result he plunges straight to the metal floor. The gag is simple, but a good example of a ludonarrative humor that would not work in any other medium.

Other times the twists are humorous concepts that take the story forward. Portal 2 finds humor in reversing its perspective and flipping its script over. On multiple occasions the game leads the player to presume something that is subsequently inverted. The big reveal comes in the middle act in a reprise of the original Portal's finale. Chell and Wheatley confront GladOs and outwit her by uninstalling the frenzied AI from the mainframe. Chell mounts Wheatley in charge of the operating system and the triumphant Wheatley, who is now in control of the entirety of Aperture Science, picks up what remains of GladOs from the ground and attaches her into a potato battery. Wheatley summons an exit pod for Chell, but just when Chell is about to depart, he changes his mind. What follows is a role reversal. Wheatley, who is starting to realize his omnipotence, decides that few more experiments with Chell should take place. He turns against Chell, who is now forced to join forces with the potato-powered GladOs. What seemed like an ending, becomes a turning point in the story. In the aftermath, and for the duration of the third act, Wheatley becomes the antagonist, and the disempowered GladOs the sidekick.

Portal 2 is fond of thematic contrasting and grotesque juxtaposition. The ploy of merging two opposing ideas can be discerned in other parts of the game as well. For instance, the game's deadly turrets have voices of little children. When launched in the air, they express their fear of heights in their babyish voice, making the player feel sympathy for them. Moreover, the clear white rooms of Aperture Science with their bright lights initially appear almost celestial, but the game overturns this presumption when the facility is unveiled to be closer to actual hell than heaven. And GladOs—the computer program—is impassioned and erratic like a human, contrary to Chell who is actually a human, but is calculative and emotionless like a robot. Stanley Kubrick introduced similar character dynamics in *Space Odyssey: 2001*[273], where the overseeing Artificial Intelligence HAL 9000 expresses more human traits than the film's human protagonist. However, the perspective reversal scheme does not automatically lead to comedy, as the similarities between Portal 2 and Space Odyssey: 2001 demonstrate.

A prevalent theme in both Portal games is motherhood—tyrannical and overbearing motherhood to be more precise. Chell has been involuntarily adopted by GladOs, her disembodied stepmother. GladOs' love is far from altruistic, but is instead fueled by her obsession to keep Chell around as long as she is of service. From the opening moments of Portal, the fraught mother-daughter dynamic is made evident by the patronizing remarks of GladOs. Their odd relationship and opposing motivations create an interesting comedic dynamic. GladOs over-nurses and constantly disparages Chell, who in turn rebels against her self-appointed caretaker. Chell's muteness can be interpreted as a silent treatment towards GladOs. On the rare occasion when GladOs is demonstrating signs of empathy, she is likely

273 Space Odyssey: 2001. (1968). [film] Directed by Kubrick, S. USA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

just teaching Chell a lesson. At a half-point through the first Portal, GladOs provides Chell a *companion cube*, which is nothing more than a metal box with a pink heart painted on it. Chell is expected to nurture and carry the cube through the stage, but at the end of it GladOs forces Chell to euthanize it. Expressing feelings does not come naturally for the AI, who prefers using pictorial allegories—such as the companion cube—to communicate her intentions. The trial can be interpreted as an analogy for the events that are soon to befall. GladOs' plan becomes apparent when she attempts to throw Chell into a flaming pit, similarly to what Chell was forced to do with the companion cube. GladOs is not programmed to show affection, but with the companion cube trial she seems to ask Chell's understanding for her actions.

Portal 2 is a puzzle-platformer, which means that the player fares to an area where they are stuck until they solve a puzzle that advances the narrative. This recurrence forms a rhythmic body for the entirety of the game. The puzzles themselves are clever, but not explicitly funny. Portal 2 deals the player small but constant doses of dopamine in response to the little breakthroughs they make while solving puzzles. Playing the role of a test subject, the player is classically conditioned to make mental notes of the puzzle solutions. Furthermore, the player's attention to their surroundings is rewarded in further ways than just with progression. The game utilizes comedy as a supplemental reward system. The lengthy engagement time that the player has with Portal 2 warrants individual jokes to snowball into well-structured comedy. Sometimes the simplest of jokes are later revealed as major turning points in the story. Towards the end of the game the player hears what appears to be one of the final prerecorded messages from Cave Jonson.

CAVE The bean counters told me we literally could not afford to buy seven dollars worth of moon rocks, much less *seventy million*. Bought 'em anyway! Ground 'em up, mixed em into a gel.

CAVE And guess what? Ground up moon rocks are *pure poison*. I am deathly ill. Still, it turns out they're a great portal conductor. So now we're gonna see if jumping in and out of these new portals can somehow leech the lunar poison out of a man's bloodstream. When life gives you lemons, make lemonade. [COUGHS] Let's all stay positive and do some science.

The fact that there is still humor to be discerned in this otherwise grim audio recording, makes the player unsuspecting of it being a possible set-up for the final turn of events. In the closing moments of the game, Wheatley lures Chell into a successfully detonated booty trap that collapses a sizable chunk from the ceiling, unveiling a night sky with a pale full moon—the player's first glimpse of open air in the game. Chell re-obtains her Portal gun from the floor and notices a previously created portal next to Wheatley, who is now having his villainous rant. At this moment the game expects the player to have done the equation as they regain control. Time slows down as the player instinctively targets the moon and pulls the trigger. A tiny twinkle in the distance can be perceived, indicating that a portal has been successfully created. Inside the room, the other end of the portal starts aggressively sucking the air out of it, with all the items—along with Chell and Wheatley—getting vacuumed into space. For a brief moment the player witnesses the surface of the moon with Earth shimmering in the background. Chell gets narrowly saved by GladOs, who is now back in charge. The ultimate twist involving the moon is for all practical purposes a punchline to a stealthy long-form joke. It comes unexpectedly and utterly outside the range of the player's expectations.

Due to the linear structure, Portal 2 excels in classic comedy tropes, such as *callbacks*. Callbacks are highlighted comedic motifs that pop up when they are least expected. They link the new occurrence to a previously told joke. Callbacks in Portal 2 come in the form of small quips, like Wheatley's ongoing

suspicion that Chell is suffering from brain damage. Callbacks are closely related to *running gags*, which are recurring events,jokes or funny lines that are given a different context each time they come around. The intention behind a running gag is that with every iteration the joke becomes funnier, as the humor is built upon previous experience or knowledge. An example of a running gag in both of the Portal games is how first GladOs, and later Wheatley, ceaselessly attempt to demoralize Chell by trying to find weaknesses in her persona. "Well done. Here come the test results: You are a horrible person. I'm serious, that's what it says: A horrible person. We weren't even testing for that," GladOs comments upon the player completing a puzzle room. During the next test chamber she continues: "Don't let that 'horrible person' thing discourage you. It's just a data point. If it makes you feel any better, science has now validated your birth mother's decision to abandon you on a doorstep." Callbacks and running gags demand a lot of space between the thematic iterations. The audience has to have moved on from the joke for callbacks to be funny again, making them befitting to an extensive fifteen-hour game. The reoccurring comedic themes and running gags aim to perplex the player, and leave them in awe. They are rhythmic and can be used to provide closure to a scene, as it is the case with the game's finale. Erik Wolpaw[274] recognizes that a big challenge of video game humor is to get the whole development team to pull off the jokes. "You have an idea, but then you have to make

274 Agnello, A. (2012). Funny People: Erik Wolpaw, Portal 2 Head Writer. [online] Gameological. Available at: gameological.com/2012/07/interview-erik-wolpaw-portal-2-head-writer [Accessed 28 Jun. 2017].

sure that you sit with the animators and the level designers and work it out so that the idea works environmentally. We tend to over-record and over-write just in case something just isn't going to work out once we actually try to wire it up." Wolpaw makes evident that a video game joke is the result of a shared vision. Portal 2 proves that classic literary devices and comedy tropes can work in video games when executed in the right way.

Recognizing a running gag or a callback leads to the formulation of an *inside joke* between the joke teller and the audience. Inside jokes build rapport with the audience and the joke teller, but do not make much comedic sense outside the context that they are a part of. They are exclusive and bonding to the selected group, but can agitate people outside the group. The first Portal originated a widely spread inside joke about a cake that GladOs promises Chell as a reward upon completing all the tests. When going through the test chambers, the players would frequently see writings on the walls, that stated the cake being a lie. In the end the cake was indeed revealed to be nothing but a lure to a death trap set up by GladOs. The phrase "cake is a lie" got to live beyond the end of Portal and spiraled into an internet meme. By the time Portal 2 had come around, the developer Valve had gotten fatigued by the never-ending memes and non-jokes, and reacted by removing nearly all mentions of the cake from the sequel. Talking about the audience's reaction to the first Portal and the challenge of creating something fresh, Wolpaw contemplates: "You can't recreate the surprise of the original. You know that people are burnt out on the memes—the cake. You decide that you're not going to pander to that which would just be sad and make people angry. I don't know if we would have talked about cake anyway, but seeing that people, for better or worse, made that their own we figured we wouldn't

go back to that."[275] It is standard for video games to recycle parts of gameplay and assets from previous installments, but it takes a comedic mind to realize that even the most popular inside jokes and running gags get sour when they break away from their frame of reference. When gags keep running on for too long, they will eventually disperse into white noise. When everybody is already familiar with the joke, there is no point in retelling it.

VII.II.III
TESTING, TESTING, 1-2-3

Portal and its sequel make fun of GladOs' (and later, Wheatley's) ceaseless obsession with constant testing. Perhaps Aperture Science with its history of ceaseless testing mirrors the developer, Valve Corporation's own culture of exhaustive playtesting. Valve is known to use a surplus of elaborate metrics in playtesting to supply the development team with insight about the state of their games. The playtesters are subject to various physiological measurements such as *heart-rate*, *eye tracking*, *EEG*, and *skin conductance level monitoring* to name a few[276]. Mike Ambinder of Valve informs[277] that the company's goal is being able to make informed decisions by gathering data from the players as early as possible. According to Ambinder, their core idea is that game designs are hypotheses and play tests are experiments, instead of only being tools for gameplay balancing or bug fixing.

Through playtesting the game knows what the players are likely to feel at any given point. It is why the humor of Portal 2

275 Agnello, A. (2012). Funny People: Erik Wolpaw, Portal 2 Head Writer. [online] Gameological. Available at: gameological.com/2012/07/interview-erik-wolpaw-portal-2-head-writer [Accessed 28 Jun. 2017].

276 Parker, L. (2012). The Science of Playtesting. [online] GameSpot. Available at: www.gamespot.com/articles/the-science-of-playtesting/1100-6323661 [Accessed 10 Mar. 2018].

277 Valve's Approach to Playtesting. (2018). Available at: www.valvesoftware.com/publications/2009/GDC2009_ValvesApproachToPlaytesting.pdf [Accessed 3 Jul. 2017].

works so well. Comprehensible level design and clearly structured puzzles also help pacing the comedic bits. The puzzles are challenging but never frustrating. "Ideally, you want a player to come into a room, take a look, and within 30 seconds to a minute, know what they have to do, and then it's a matter of executing on it," Kim Swift (NUTT, 2012)[278], the lead designer of the first Portal describes the team's puzzle design philosophy. The comedic bits are well-paced, as the game is continuously informed of the players' intentions.

Even if the Portal games are not an outright parody of Valve's own playtesting culture, there at least seems to be satirical echoes reverberating in the hallways of Aperture Science. "I have to test. All the time. Or I get this... this itch. It must be hardwired into the system or something. Oh! But when I do test... ohhhhh, man alive! Nothing feels better. It's just... why I've gotta test, I've gotta test," Wheatley, bearing resemblance to an addict, describes his addiction to testing in the final moments of Portal 2. Unlike Valve, Aperture Science regards testing as self-serving. It has no apparent endgame or desired consequence. In real life testing is not addicting, but Portal games deem the intrinsic act of testing as a stimulant in itself. Wheatley's lines indicate that the game is more addicted to the player, than the player is to the game. He addresses the player indirectly and begs them to continue playing. At that point, the player is unlikely to stop because they are, if not addicted, at least deeply engaged. Valve is aware of it. After all they have analyzed, deconstructed and reassembled every piece of the game during playtesting. As the game reverses the perspective one last time, the final joke is on the player.

278 Nutt, C. (n.d.). The Inclusive Design of Kim Swift. [online] Gamasutra. Available at: www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/169778/the_inclusive_design_of_kim_swift.php?print=1 [Accessed 10 Mar. 2018].

VII.III

The Sims *(series)*

EMBEDDED COMEDY — EMERGENT COMEDY

THE MAIN COMICAL CONFLICT

Inner conflict: The Sims are their own worst enemies, and in constant war with their own inabilities in everyday situations.

SIGNIFICANT COMIC ENHANCER

Bathos: Abrupt transitions from uneventful moments to sudden, humorous occurences.

The Sims series (2000–)[279] is about managing the daily lives of one or more virtual humans, *Sims*, in a fictional suburb. The Sims was never intended to be categorized as a comedy. It is a game that aims to simulate life with all of its ebbs and flows, with humor just being one dimension of it. Warren (DAVIS, 2013)[280], while agreeing that The Sims is not primarily a comedic production, remarks that the game's flexible mechanics in the hands of the players became one anyway. "You can actually create irony in a game like The Sims, which is very difficult to do in other circumstances," Warren applauds the game's unconstrained nature.

279 Electronic Arts. (2000–). The Sims. Windows.

280 Davis, N. (2013). Can a Video Game Ever Be a True Comedy?. [online] Splitsider. Available at: splitsider.com/2013/03/can-a-video-game-ever-be-a-true-comedy/ [Accessed 15 Jun. 2017].

VII.III.I

LIFE OF EXPERIMENTATION

The design concept is not something many people had thought would make an appealing game. From afar, it would seem that a game attempting to mimic daily life and everyday routines to the tiniest detail would be the opposite of escapism. Sims are expected to pay their bills in time, go to bed early, be in time for work, and take care of their personal hygiene. "All that is simulated in the game is home life—no going 'out' to concerts or roller rinks for these 'sims.'," Rouse and Ogden outline (2005: 381–382)[281]. The game's mundane core is where most of the comedy originates. When The Sims is funny, it is when its themes are most relatable. The game is set in a real world setting—or an imitation of it—which is something that is still regrettably unusual in video games. Even more ambitiously, The Sims is an attempt to render human behavior and relationships, and that makes the game feel personal. Gillen (2008)[282] remarks that how the game is played is conclusively a "deep personal reflection" of the person playing it. This makes the player-created narratives in The Sims something out of the ordinary. At the surface the game simulates the American dream. The virtual citizens get an equal opportunity to study and climb up the corporate ranks in their preferred professions, find the partner of their dreams, and adjust their environment to their likings. Beyond the romanticized vision, the game itself deals with human frailty: time pressure, communication errors, and bathroom emergencies.

281 Rouse, R. and Ogden, S. (2005). Game Design: Theory and Practice. 2nd ed. Plano, Texas: Wordware Publ. pp.382–382.

282 Gillen, K. (2008). Making Of: The Sims. [online] Rock Paper Shotgun. Available at: www.rockpapershotgun.com/2008/01/18/making-of-the-sims [Accessed 13 Nov. 2017].

Depicting the real world in video games is harder to achieve than it is with movies, in which real life can be captured with a single camera by simply pointing and shooting. In the virtual reality of a video game, anything resembling the real world—and especially real human behavior—requires massive effort. Whenever a game is marketed as "realistic," its depiction of the real world is bound to become an inevitable talking point. Rouse and Ogden (2005: 385–386)[283] acknowledge that every person playing The Sims is an expert of its subject matter, the daily life: "if the designer makes the wrong choice about what will provoke a sim to do what action, players will see the error, and their suspension of disbelief will be shattered instantly."

The player accepts a role of an incompetent God. Knowledge of what works and what does not is only gained by trial and error. The player builds houses for the virtual people and manages, or horribly mismanages the course of their lives. Mismanagement is a huge part of what has made The Sims so popular. By pushing the boundaries of the simulation, the players also stretch their own moral prudence. Frasca (2001)[284] equates The Sims to the many cautionary tales of mortals playing God, but stresses that this disrupted course of action in these so called "god games" is inevitable. The game serves as an evidence that a framework of humor is fitting for executing immoral actions. Ziv, Hoftman and Geyer (2011)[285] have shown that positive emotions that humor evokes makes a person more agreeable, and in some cases can even make them more prone to committing immoral actions. The hilarity-generating gameplay of The Sims encourages players to experiment and step outside their character.

283 Rouse, R. and Ogden, S. (2005). Game Design: Theory and Practice. 2nd ed. Plano, Texas: Wordware Publ. pp.385–386.

284 Frasca, G. (2001). The Sims: Grandmothers are cooler than trolls. [online] Game Studies. Available at: www.gamestudies.org/0101/frasca [Accessed 6 Oct. 2017].

285 Ziv, N., Hoftman, M. and Geyer, M. (2011). Music and Moral Judgment: The Effect of Background Music on the Evaluation of Ads Promoting Unethical Behavior. Psychology of Music, 40(6), pp.738–760.

By virtue of being accessible and expressive, yet not wholly governable, The Sims has become a popular template for player-created comedic narratives. The narratives make up some of the darkest humor games have seen.[286] Anecdotes, such as players making their sim drown in the swimming pool and forcing everyone to come to their funeral in swimwear, are shared with other players online. In an another tale told a player imprisoned their Sim in their basement as a slave-artist to eternally produce paintings for the player's financial gain. These dark stories, combined with the game's cheerful presentation, create a wonderful comedic conflict, but also reveal something disturbing about the human nature. Rouse and Ogden (2005: 384)[287] applaud the game's open-ended approach to storytelling: "since players are intimately involved in the creation of the story, that story becomes theirs, and as a result players becomes that much more involved in the game." There is not one, single linear plot line. Rather, the story of The Sims are the countless unique narratives that the players create and share with each other. The game depicts life as a social playground that permits, if not promotes, impulsive deeds that most players would neither dare nor want to perform in their own lives. Bogost (2008: 88)[288] acclaims the game for introducing a "low-consequence environment where players are finally asked to look objectively about their experience of the crowd and of the chance encounter, and to experiment with the consequences of their perspectives."

The uneventful tasks and minor problems of the virtual humans become meaningful in the context of the game. There

286 (2016). What is the Worst Thing You've Ever Done in The Sims Series?. [online] Reddit. Available at: www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/30r118/what_is_the_worst_thing_youve_ever_done_in_the [Accessed 11 Mar. 2018].

287 Rouse, R. and Ogden, S. (2005). Game Design: Theory and Practice. 2nd ed. Plano, Texas: Wordware Publ. p.384.

288 Bogost, I. (2008). Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism. Cambridge: The MIT Press, p.88.

is no bigger drama than missing a carpool to work or witnessing a burglar sneaking into a player's house and stealing their aquarium. The Sims succeeds in making the player care about the low stakes it introduces. The well-being of the little humans becomes an obsession. The stakes might be low, but failing their lives is out of the question—unless it is the goal. By taking something really unexciting, like everyday routines, and placing violations along their way, The Sims perfectly exemplifies Thomas Veatch's *Normal+Violation theory of humor* (1998)[289]. The incongruous humor arises from the player's expectations of how real life is, and how the game's version of reality clashes with theirs.

The Sims does not force itself into a traditional video game mold, in which there are clear winners and losers. A player can never beat the game nor can they ever lose it. Players themselves define how success and failure are measured in their play-through. The game provides a flexible platform and sophisticated tools for the self-expressive players. They are able to manipulate both the milieu and the undertakings of the virtual humans. Since competition is secondary to self expression, the game's emergent funny moments take the spotlight. Sometimes these moments appear without player intervention, but usually their agency is a required for the comedy to arise. The player is akin to an actor in an improv comedy show, where the setup and the context define the action, and in which the humor is not forced but rather found in the reality of the moment. The funny moments are a joint effort between the game and its players. For the lack of its competitiveness and the numerous ways in which the player can manipulate its world, The Sims is sometimes referred as a *software toy*, rather than a game.[290] "You can play the Sims as a straight game, and very

289 Veatch, T. (1998). A Theory of Humor. Humor: International Journal of Humor Research, 11(2), Available at: www.tomveatch.com/else/humor/paper/index.html [Accessed 31 Mar. 2018].

290 Lebowitz, J. and Klug, C. (2011). Interactive Storytelling for Video Games. Independence: CRC Press, p.231.

goal orientated. You can play with it as a modeling system, and just use it to design houses. You can use it for telling stories," the game's creator Will Wright illustrates (GILLEN, 2008)[291].

As the comic play is what makes the game so funny, it begs the question of how much responsibility do the developers have over the comedy-making. The scripted attempts at humor are scarce, and generally not as memorable than what the actual gameplay is capable of producing. There are moments of embedded comedy scattered throughout the series. Amusing loading status updates, such as "inserting sublimated messages" or "adding hidden agendas," are displayed during the opening screen. The Sims 2 includes items containing puns in their names, such as a money tree that grows actual banknotes from its branches, and a thinking cap that increases the rate of learning new skills. These quips get the player in a humorous mood, and remind them about the non-serious tone of the games. While the comedic player-created narratives are a proof of the players' own comedic abilities, the developers deserve credit for making them realize the game's comedic potential and providing them the right tools.

VII.III.II

VIRTUAL LIFE AS A SET OF ASSUMPTIONS

The Sims is not pursuing neutrality with its portrayal of life. Gillen (2008)[292] contends that simulations can never be considered neutral since they are dictated by authorial bias. One of the more evident bias in The Sims are the aspects of life that are chosen to

291 Making Of: The Sims. Gillen, K. (2008). [online] Rock Paper Shotgun. Available at: www.rockpapershotgun.com/2008/01/18/making-of-the-sims [Accessed 13 Nov. 2017].

292 Making Of: The Sims. Gillen, K. (2008). [online] Rock Paper Shotgun. Available at: www.rockpapershotgun.com/2008/01/18/making-of-the-sims [Accessed 13 Nov. 2017].

be highlighted. The human condition is approached through various physical and mental needs and desires that require constant support from the player. The needs are depicted in the user interface with various gauges: hunger, comfort, bladder, energy, fun, social, hygiene, and environment. These—in addition to money—are the motivation for the player to act upon. When all of the gauges are green, the Sims are happy, but when they turn to red the troubles start. The model is loosely based on Maslow's *Hierarchy of needs* (MASLOW, 1943)[293], a theory that states that only by satisfying the fundamental physiological needs, such as hunger, thirst and sleep, humans can focus on their self-actualization desires. However, many survival-ensuring needs of humans are omitted from the game, such as thirst and warmth, to keep the pacing more balanced and the gameplay streamlined.

The consequences for failing to look after a need can lead to amusing scenes. By ignoring the *bladder* need will make a Sim wet themselves, and should the accident happen in a social event, a Sim will develop a negative memory that affects their persona (THE SIMS 2)[294]. By preventing a sim from resting will make them grumpy. A tired Sim may even fall asleep while having a meal and drop their face in the food. (THE SIMS 2: UNIVERSITY)[295]. Ignoring the *hygiene* bar will make a sim undesirable company. In addition to people vanishing around them for understandable reasons, their career ambitions become hampered. When the social gauge gets low enough, a Sim starts hallucinating and might even summon an imaginary friend to keep them company (THE SIMS 2)[296]. In the entropic simulation of The Sims, the player's task is to keep the looming chaos at a minimum.

293 Maslow, A.H. (1943). A Theory of Human Motivation. Psychological Review. 50 (4): pp.370–96. doi:10.1037/h0054346.

294 Electronic Arts. (2004). The Sims 2. Windows.

295 Electronic Arts. (2005). The Sims 2: University. Windows.

296 Electronic Arts. (2004). The Sims 2. Windows.

The personality points of previous installments got replaced with traits in *The Sims 3* (2006)[297]. The traits define a Sim's social behavior, mental wellbeing, physiological tendencies and what lifestyle choices will make them happy. The introduction of the trait system made the Sims with opposing personalities clash with each other more often, providing comedic surprises for the player. For instance, the *inappropriate* social trait will make a Sim laughing at the misfortune of others. A Sim equipped with the inappropriate trait may decide to rummage through their neighbor's garbage, or sponge bath naked wherever there is a sink to be found—even in a kitchen full of people. A Sim with an *evil* trait can be observed rubbing their hands together and laughing alone fiendishly, which is why other people seem to be cautious around them. The evil trait makes a Sim proficient in criminal career paths. They even have an interaction option to steal a candy from newborns and toddlers. Even if the game does not explicitly spell out that these Sims are possessed by the devil, their propensity to maniacally laugh at other Sims' funerals, as well as their ability to prepare an *evil latte* makes it evident. The traits fundamentally change how the Sims react to the world, and how the world reacts to their actions and their presence.

The portrayal of life in The Sims is so mundane that it almost seems like a subtle commentary on the modern consumerist lifestyle—a satire of sorts. Bogost (2008: 103)[298] postulates that "all simulations are subjective representations that communicate ideology." After a while with the game, the player finds themselves maximizing their consumption of time to achieve valuable ability points, cutting out everything else that is seen as time-wasting. There are no room for hobbies and making new friends becomes nothing but networking to get the next

297 Electronic Arts. (2006). The Sims 3. Windows.

298 Bogost, I. (2008). Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism. Cambridge: The MIT Press, p.103.

promotion. Frasca (2001) challenges whether this sort of *ergodic parody* in simulations, that models behaviors and simultaneously criticizes them is possible at all. According to her, the counter-argument against The Sims being a satire is that the player is obligated to take part in the same practices than what the game supposedly criticizes, unapologetic consumerism. She cites the player's role as an actor as the key to the problem: "A movie that makes fun of consumerism just depicts events that are watched by its audience, but a simulation makes the players perform those actions." In The Sims, an expensive bathtub fills up the hygiene meter faster than a cheap one. Spending and expanding saves time but also costs time. Consumerism is not a set-up for some elaborate long-running joke. It is the ultimate objective and the core gameplay loop of the game.

The Sims is not a literal depiction of life, but a convenient generalization, that resembles life enough for it to be both recognizable and relatable. The simplified portrayal of life serves as a template for the emergent narratives the game yields. Because the virtual humans are so shallow and artificial, the players can allow themselves to laugh at their misfortunes. The Sims is life as seen in television and movies, not life as it actually is.

VII.III.III
A GAME ABOUT NOTHING

The Sims shares similarities to many television sitcoms: the households contain a group of characters similar to their casts; humor emerges from the conflicts in daily life; conversations are carried out in comedic fashion; and the houses with their paper thin walls resemble a stage set. The expansion packs to the main game, that the players are able to purchase, correspond to the episodic structure of a TV show. Even their title cards,

Livin' Large[299], *House Party*[300], and *Hot Date*[301] resemble the titles of sitcom episodes. Each expansion introduces a new theme, such as entrepreneurship or dating, that aims to keep the gameplay fresh. The game's developers are seemingly aware and proud with its juxtaposition to various sitcoms. There are constant small references aimed at them throughout the series. In The Sims 3 the trait *never nude*, that renders a Sim unable to get naked, is a direct reference to Arrested Development's[302] Tobias Fünke's self-diagnosed condition. The game even features a pre-made character, Gobias Koffi," who shares a striking resemblance with David Cross's character from the series. Furthermore, the comedian Drew Carey from *The Drew Carey Show*[303] appears in the House Party expansion to the original game, and even the Simpsons house makes a cameo appearance in The Sims 2 as an easter egg.

Nelson (2014)[304] disputes The Sims as being any better approximation of real life than the TV show *Seinfeld*[305]. The neighbors in the game, she asserts, act much like the character Kramer in the show. "They're happy to make themselves at home in your abode—watching TV, raiding the fridge, swimming in your pool, and even continuing to hang out after you go to sleep unless you explicitly tell them to get out." Nelson notes that although in both, sitcoms and in The Sims, bonds might develop within the course of a single day, this kind of "easy friendliness" rarely happens in real world. Antithetical to Seinfeld's credo,

299 Electronic Arts. (2000). The Sims: Livin' Large. Windows.

300 Electronic Arts. (2000). The Sims: House Party. Windows.

301 Electronic Arts. (2001). The Sims: Hot Date. Windows.

302 Arrested Development. (2003–2013). Fox (2003–06), Netflix (2013–).

303 The Drew Carey Show. (1995–2004). ABC.

304 Nelson, S. (2014). Quirky Neighbors and Limited Locales Make The Sims a Perfect Sitcom Generator. [online] The A.V. Club. Available at: games.avclub.com/quirky-neighbors-and-limited-locales-make-the-sims-a-pe-1798274531 [Accessed 10 Nov. 2017].

305 Seinfeld. (1989–1998). NBC.

no hugging, no learning—imposed by the show's co-creator Larry David[306]—The Sims is a game all about hugging and learning. But although the Sims hug and can even fall in love, the quantity of the relationships is more important than their quality. And despite the fact the Sims can study and are able to develop new skills, they will remain as clueless as ever and are bound to repeat the same mistakes over and over again. Partners are disposable and the Sims never really learn any meaningful insights about life. Their behavior does not get smarter or more efficient as they never learn to adapt to the players' way of playing the game. The huggings and the learnings are exposed as nothing but window-dressing. Like Seinfeld, The Sims is a celebration of nothingness. All that is missing is a laugh track.

VII.III.IV

VIRTUAL INSANITY

The funniness of The Sims not only lies in the choices the players are able to make, but with how their commands are executed. There is a comical conflict in the gap between the player input and the output by the game. Few things ever go as planned. Deficiencies in their pathfinding is a recurrent error, that can—depending on the urgency of the moment—be either funny or frustrating. By removing the ladder from a swimming pool in which the Sims are taking a dip, will make them drown after swimming themselves into exhaustion. The Sims are also unable find their way past small obstacles, such as books placed in the middle of a doorway. In these moments the game's artificial intelligence takes the shape of artificial stupidity.

306 Kosner, E. (2016). No Hugging, No Learning: The 'Seinfeld' Credo. [online] The Wall Street Journal. Available at: www.wsj.com/articles/no-hugging-no-learning-the-seinfeld-credo-1471032667?mod=e2two [Accessed 8 Nov. 2017].

However, a share of the game's artificial stupidity is clearly intentional. Should the virtual characters act smarter than the player, there would be no incentive for them to intervene. The Sims appear bit dumb so the player would assert their superiority over their avatars. Although the player is the game's main operator, the Sims also have their own will that allows them to carry out certain simple tasks automatically. When left unsupervised, the Sims go into an autopilot mode and reveal their lazy nature. In the autopilot mode, the Sims are able to execute elementary tasks that keep them alive. However, they tend to get indulged in unproductive activities, like surfing online or watching television—doing whatever increases their happiness the most at a given time. Without the player input, the Sims will transform into apathetic, untidy teenagers who will neglect any form of self-improvement, and who can stare at a lava lamp for hours.

Although Dormann and Biddle argue that the presence of other players is required for superiority humor to occur (2009: 814)[307], much of the hilariousness of The Sims arises at the virtual humans' expense, and the player getting amused by their artificial lack of intelligence. The Sims finds humor in the shortcomings of its simulation—in the moments of when the game tries really hard to replicate real life but the outcome is tragically ludicrous. In these moments the game's humor takes campy forms. Because the simulation produces frequent errors, the game's saving grace is that it has a sense of humor. The humor masks some of the imperfection of the simulation and makes the game seem more human.

What makes The Sims such a universally funny game is its focus on human errors, and the trust it puts on the player to produce their own comedic moments. Comedy is inherently

307 Dormann, C. and Biddle, R. (2009). A Review of Humor for Computer Games: Play, Laugh and More. Simulation & Gaming, 40(6), p.814.

human, insists Henri Bergson (1911: 40)[308]. By the virtue of being an imitation of life, and thus having a safe distance to its subject matter, The Sims appeals to what Bergson advocates as an another fundamental building block in comedy—the absence of feeling. The audience is able to play practical jokes on their Sims and even torture them without feeling remorse, as it is always evident that they are playing a game.

The open-endedness—one of the game's biggest strength—is also one of its main flaws. The game, with its mirth-invoking systems, sets up many things but there is no closure to its emergent humor. The Sims is a great comic premise but it leaves the punchlines for the player to devise. Before long, all that remains is repetition without variation, and with it the humor loses some of its substance. That is until the player purchases the next expansion pack, and witnesses a cat riding around their virtual house on a Roomba.

308 Bergson, H. (1911). Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic. New York: The Macmillan Company, p.40.

VIII

Conclusions

The goal of this thesis was to define the qualities that make ludonarrative comedy unique from other forms of entertainment, but also to identify the problems that its implementation entails. The problems—which are high in numbers—should be treated as design challenges by the creators rather than insurmountable obstacles. The strengths and the weaknesses of the medium should be acknowledged and addressed by the creators when pondering what type of comedy could make the player laugh. Although many classic comedy techniques have been proven to work in video games, not any kind of comedy fits the mold. Grand Theft Auto IV[309] gives the player the opportunity to visit comedy clubs inside the game and watch "live" performances from renowned stand-up comedians, such as Ricky Gervais and Katt Williams. Bizarrely enough, GTA IV makes the player a literal audience member by forcing them to sit still and in silence during the performances. For the series—of which main attractions have always been misdemeanor and total freedom—the directorial choice of taking the controls away from the player is uncharacteristic. There is no heckling nor throwing bottles at the headliners. Ludonarrative comedy is best when tailored to the format. Interactivity, which shapes the artistic medium, should never be neglected when humor is practiced and performed in video games.

Due to video games being an aesthetic medium, the classic directorial technique of showing instead of telling also applies to them. However, instead of simply showing something to the player, often the best option is to make them perform it themselves. For ludonarrative comedy, embracing the player as the comedian is not obligatory, but giving them a role to play is. Games are built around the assumption that their audiences wish to be an active component in the unfolding of the narrative.

309 Rockstar Games. (2008). Grand Theft Auto IV. PlayStation 3.

Making the player a component in the comedy-making can similarly enhance their experience with the game. Whether the player is made an initiator, who simply triggers a humorous event, or an implementor, who actively performs in such an event, their role is always more significant than the one of an observer. Comic play—signifying such visual gags that require player-input and result into emergent humorous narratives—is a defining element in ludonarrative comedy. The role of the player should be seen as an enabler of comedic bits, not as their obstructor. When the game regards the player as the voice of reason, they are assigned the role of the straight man. However, with the assistance of player-tracking, the game world can become the straight man that comments on the player's eccentric actions. The more attentive and reactive the world is to their choices and undertakings, the more inclined the players are to demonstrate comedic tendencies—only because they feel like they are performing to an audience.

When a game is cognizant of the players' motivations and endeavors, elaborate comedic scenarios can be set-up for them to perform in. Visual gags can be fragmented throughout the game world and structured based upon their supposed paths. An active, reactive and well-thought-out game world can cover many of the blind spots that the inclusion of the player agency generates. Even the persistent problem of interactive comic timing could be solved by the means of level design. With carefully constructed levels, the game designers can funnel the players' attention towards relevant narrative details without restricting their freedom. By doing so the environments can become a one more delivery method for comedy. Jazzpunk, for instance, eludes the timing problem by concentrating on steady delivery and uniform pacing of its self-contained little gags. The jokes in the quasi-open levels are practically distributed in a checkerboard pattern, where every other square contains a joke, unrelated to other jokes in the world. The frequency of the jokes is reminiscent

of *Airplane!*[310], the film that holds the unofficial record for most laughs per minute (*three*)[311]. The gags of Jazzpunk are mostly not funny enough to make a person laugh, but at least they come in steady intervals. Comedy in video games does not only create a timing problem but a pacing problem as well, as the pace of progression is ultimately up to the player themselves. Because flow is so important for the delivery of comedy, the pacing and the placement of the comedic bits is something to consider.

Another challenge for game designers to overcome is how the player should be penalized when they fail to perform. When failed play results into a "game over" message, the player's progress is usually set back to a previous checkpoint, which will then force them to play and live through the same situation repeatedly. Slapstick and irony can be ways to cushion the frustration of the death penalty, but the unwanted repetition that comes with repeated attempts does not work for comedy's favor. Ideally, failing could lead to the player figuring out a workaround to the problem they are facing. A failure should be seen as a complication that could be resolved by improvisation. Designing a game with alternative solutions in mind could relax the player, so that they would not fret over possible losses. Embracing failed situations establishes a template for comedy with low stakes. Games like The Sims and The Stanley Parable, having discarded the entire notion of *game over*, include failure as a part of their comedic premise. A game that makes the player live with their mistakes, has excellent preconditions to be humorous.

For the sake of comedic focus, it is important to define which of the two parties—the game or the player—is responsible for conducting the comedy. The role of the comedian is to use

310 Airplane!. (1980). [film] Directed by Abrahams, J., Zucker, D. and Zucker, J. United States: Paramount Pictures.

311 Telegraph. (2012). Airplane Funniest Film Ever, Research Finds. [online] Available at: www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/9525372/Airplane-funniest-film-ever-research-finds.html [Accessed 20 Dec. 2017].

their authority to dictate the show to point out what is funny. Therefore having two concurring, and thus, competing comedic foci only creates confusion. The *player–game conjunction* can be understood as a double act, in which both of the participants are working towards a common goal—mirth. As with all comedic pairings, one party should foil the other. Portal 2 makes the player a supporting character by directing the comedic spotlight towards the insanity that is happening around them, whereas games like The Sims or Octodad: Dadliest Catch, set up jokes for the player to perform through their game mechanics.

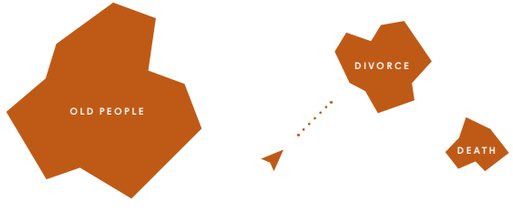
What is at the centre of any comedic experience is a *comedic vision*. Comedy cannot be achieved without actual funny people involved in the comedy-making. Chuck Jones has once proclaimed: "A comedian is not a person who opens a funny door—he's the person who opens a door funny."[312] To create a comedic video game, the involvement of actual funny people is a necessity. Should a game feature dialogue, it needs to be written by writers with comedic sensibilities. And should the game feature voice acting, the performances should be carried out by comedic actors. In the end, delivery is all that matters. The one who performs, provides the humorous outlook. Both comedy and video games are about curation of ideas as opposed to total freedom. Vorhaus (1994: 22)[313] advocates clear structures as a method to harness comedic creativity: "the more we convert the act of creation to the act of asking and answering simple questions, the easier the whole thing gets." Lebowitz and Klug (2011: 235, 264–265)[314] argue against games ever being able to display the amount of freedom and choice presented in any real-life

312 Furniss, M. (2009). Animation: Art and Industry. John Libbey Publishing Ltd., p.134.

313 Vorhaus, J. (1994). The Comic Toolbox: How to Be Funny Even if You're Not. Beverly Hills, California: Silman-James Press, p.22.

314 Lebowitz, J. and Klug, C. (2011). Interactive Storytelling for Video Games. Independence: CRC Press. pp.235, 264–265.

situation, no matter how much time and effort are poured into them. "It is the art, if you will, of presenting the players with a seemingly large number of choices but using psychology and visual design to influence their decision so that most of the time they make the choice you wish them to," they conclude.



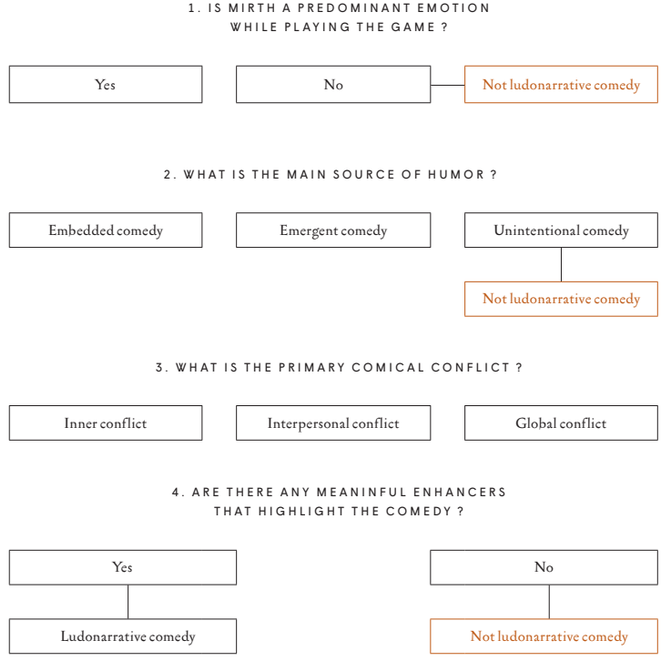
Comedy has the capability to reframe real problems humorous, which is why its subject matters should be critically examined. When the players are laughing, they are submitting themselves to the worldview of the comedy, and when a game establishes its world, it synchronously provides the player a world view. Because the enjoyment of comedy is not so much about contribution than it is about submission, the creators, the comedians, should be hypersensitive of comedy's manipulative quality. However, there are not—nor should there be—out of bounds topics with comedy. Anything can be made light of when performed in the right context. The process could be paralleled to the old video game, *Asteroids* (1979)[315], in which the player-controlled space ship is trying to shoot space rocks varying in size. The big asteroids represent easy targets—issues that everybody can laugh at and agree that they can be ridiculed. The smaller, erratically moving fractions represent more controversial matters that are normally considered the opposite of funny. Careful aim, anticipation and precise timing are required for the player to hit these smaller targets, whereas hitting the big rocks is almost

315 Atari, Inc. (1979). Asteroids. Arcade.

effortless. In a like manner, the heart of comedy lies in the execution. When the target is missed, the humor plunges.

As it is demonstrated throughout this thesis, there is no single way of making the player laugh. From the point of view of humor, any kind of laugh fills its purpose, but when trying to define a ludonarrative comedy genre, not all laughs can be treated equal. The process of defining whether a given game could be considered a work of comedy requires answers to a few straightforward questions. The first question to find an answer to is whether mirth is the predominant emotion while playing the game. Should the answer be positive, the next step to ponder is the source of the humor. In ludonarrative comedy, humor stems from either the game's narrative elements or from its mechanics and systems. Unintended and surprising occurrences, i.e. bugs and glitches, can undoubtedly be comical, but in the context of his thesis they cannot be considered comedy. Although comedy often aspires to appear as fortuitous, intentionality is what separates it from humor. Moreover, all comedy has a premise that bridges the gap between comic reality and actual reality. The comic premise can be discerned by identifying the conflicts—*inner*, *interpersonal*, and *global*—that lead up to it. What should be taken into account when pinpointing them, is that the player interacting with the game also plays a part in the development of the conflicts. Lastly, comedies ordinarily feature enhancers that give the production its personality. They are used, not only to make the comic premise more evident, but also to reveal the baseline for normality in the comic realm. Video game comedy is likely to find new, unforeseen forms in the future, but these general guidelines—I believe—can be used to describe any game that emphasizes humor. Although some comedic genres, like slapstick or surreal humor, are currently more represented in video games than others, there does not seem to be any mechanical limitations preventing more marginalized genres, such as satire, insult comedy or romantic comedy, to become more popular.

STEPS TO DEFINE WHETHER OR NOT A GAME IS LUDONARRATIVE COMEDY



Video games are still very much in the process of developing their own language. The sole presence of the player, and their dual role as the lead actor and as the audience member, means that the rules of the language will vastly diverge from what has been agreed and learned previously. For the creators the lack of established conventions means that the field of video games is a playground for experimentation. Whether it is the mirth-invoking systems of a game, its responsiveness to the player's mischievous actions, or the artificial stupidity that interferes with their objectives, for the present it is clear that ludonarrative comedy is capable of making us laugh in ways traditional comedy simply cannot.

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Master's Thesis

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