Ludo-Comedic Consonance: An Introduction to Video Games and Comedy

Krista Bonello Rutter Giappone, Tomasz Z. Majkowski, Jaroslav Švelch

Abstact

The introductory chapter offers a review of the existing literature in the field, and identifies the contribution of this volume. The chapter introduces the bases for the relationship between games and comedy, sketches out a brief interdisciplinary history, and engages with the debates springing up around this foundational relationship. It explores the carnivalesque lineage as it is manifested in games, and moves towards a consideration of the comedic possibilities that video games open up as a specific medium. The chapter also offers an overview and breakdown of the book's content.

Keywords: comedy studies, game studies, humour, Bergson, incongruity theory, release theory, superiority theory, Bakhtin, carnivalesque, parody, vernacular culture, medium-specific humour, metareferential comedy, slapstick, ragdolls, glitch

When was the last time you laughed while playing (or watching) a video game? Was it because of a witty dialogue line or a surprising cultural reference? Or an unexpected explosion that launched you and other players flying into the air? Did you laugh at a technical glitch that made your horse appear on top of a building? Did the game trick you into doing something ridiculous while you played along? Did your favourite streamer or YouTuber make fun of a game that does not work in the way it should? Or did you just laugh along with your friends because that is what you do when you get together to play games? In any of those cases, you have experienced one of the intersections of video games with humour or comedy.

Although play and comedy would seem to bear a natural affinity, there has to date been surprisingly little academic attention devoted to their relationship, particularly as regards

digital play. In fact, numerous critics and designers believe that games in some way resist comedy and humour, and may even be inimical to it (see Dooley Murphy's chapter in this book for examples). Our volume seeks to challenge this belief and address this gap in the literature, mapping the overlaps and intersections between games and comedy, and building a long overdue foundation for interdisciplinary dialogue. While analogies between play on the one hand and humour and comedy on the other are sometimes incidental or metaphorical (such as descriptions of comedy as 'playful'), or are explored in relation to the literary-ludic postmodern text, their relationship warrants further attention. This book grounds its investigations in the structures of play, in a medium specifically designed for play, highlighting structural and cultural similarities between video games and comedy. With a nod to the game design concept of 'ludonarrative dissonance' (the disparity between the narrative and game mechanics of many video game titles – see Hocking 2007), we call this affinity 'ludo-comedic consonance'.

In this Introduction, we aim to synthesise the existing knowledge on the topic, focusing on the general relationship between play and comedy, the cultural sources of video game comedy, and the medium-specific aspect of video game humour. To demonstrate the breadth of the comic in games, we will use both well-known and obscure examples, and extend the scope of cases beyond the games discussed in the individual chapters.

Play and the Comic

Associations between play and humour are not new. Ludwig Wittgenstein (1980, 83e) likens a shared sense of humour to the reciprocal understanding of the rules of a game. From an evolutionary perspective, laughter – today associated with humour – has been a signal of play (Gervais and Wilson 2005). Moreover, the English word 'joke' likely shares its etymology with the Latin word 'jocus' (OED), "whose specific sense of joking and jesting was extended to signify play in general" in a number of European languages such as French ('jeu'), Spanish ('juego'), and Italian ('gioco') (Kendrick 2009, p. 49).

Johan Huizinga, while distinguishing play from comedy in terms of the latter's thematic make-up as a genre (1971, p. 6), roots the dramatic frame itself (whether tragic or comic) in play (p. 144). However, he seems to uphold play's close association with 'humour' (pp. 129, 205-7). In his view, 'timelessness' as "a capacity of comedy", infused with a carnival spirit (Garber 2004, p. 325), appears to draw its life from that "festive" rhythm of "timeless, ever-

recurring patterns of play" (Huizinga 1971, p. 142). Although he points out the parallels between play and serious sacred rites, he criticises "intellectual card-games" for being overly serious, even arguing that "paraphernalia of handbooks and systems and professional training has made bridge a deadly earnest business." (1971, pp. 198-199). Earnest play can, however, be considered comical by outside observers. After all, games require steadfast commitment to arbitrary rules that may seem ridiculous and irrational (as Nele van de Mosselaer observes, in this volume). This can also be illustrated by Bernard Suits's definition of games, according to which

> "games are goal-directed activities in which inefficient means are intentionally chosen. For example, in racing games one voluntarily goes all round the track in an effort to arrive at the finish line instead of "sensibly" cutting straight across the infield." (Suits 1978, p. 22)

Comedy and video games are also similar in their struggle for institutionalised recognition and status. In both cases, academic study has been belated – compare, for example, the inaugural editorial launching the first issue of the journal *Comedy Studies*, to that which opens the first issue of *Game Studies* – with their shared tone of injured incredulity and determination in taking a boldly pioneering step:

> "for students, lovers and professionals in comedy, the question might be why a genre with a millennial long tradition (stretching from Aristotle to Chris Morris) had not been considered worthy of academic attention sooner?" ("Editorial" 2010, p. 3)

> "This is a noteworthy occasion, and perhaps the most remarkable aspect is that such a journal has not been started before. As we know, there have been computer games for almost as long as there have been computers: *SpaceWar*, arguably the first modern game, turns forty this year, and commercially the genre has existed for three decades. So why not something like this before?" (Aarseth 2001)

Although now more assured, the journey towards gaining institutional footing has sometimes been a bumpy ride. Neoclassical extrapolations and transmissions of Aristotelean 'principles' aligned comedy with the 'everyday', the popular and the vulgar, in contrast to the grander genre of tragedy's focus on the suffering of the great: "Fie, comedies are fit for common wits", as opposed to tragedy, which "contain[s] matter, and not common things", says *The Spanish Tragedy*'s protagonist Hieronimo (Thomas Kyd [c. 1587] 1996, IV. i. 157-161). Neoclassical thought subjected comedy to value-judgements that tended to downgrade certain

kinds of comedy having effects that were deemed indecorous, such as laughter (Neale and Krutnik 1990, p. 14). As a new medium with mass appeal, video games have been likewise trivialised, with the film critic Roger Ebert famously claiming that they can "never be art", suggesting that games are designed to be won rather than experienced (2010).

Yet, not all play is as goal-oriented. The space opening onto play also offers a pleasurable respite, free – as in comedy (Sypher 1980) – from severe consequences, often even fictional ones (one can usually reload, for example). Moreover, Bohuslav Blažek, in an early analysis of humour in video games, describes even humorous "catastrophic" interruptions as diversions into precisely a kind of "differently structured temporal perspective", a lifting of constraints (via an encounter with the very constraints of the game) into a state of suspension that opens onto a "newfound freedom":

> "A new feature appeared in *Winter Games* [Epyx 1985], which is sorely missing from most other computer games: humour. [The editors of a German magazine] admit that when the athlete ends up on their back, on their belly or with their head in the snow in the aerial skiing "Hot Dog" discipline, the player is no longer motivated purely by performance but enjoys enacting these catastrophic variants. It might seem like a minor detail; however, it fundamentally shifts the social impact of games. Humour opens up a differently structured temporal perspective in which you cease to be hounded and can move with newfound freedom. Humour induces a distance toward the events, which is however, not dispassionately cold." (Blažek 1990, p. 83; our translation)

Sophie Quirk (2015, p. 208) has suggested that stand-up comedy "creates a playground, in Huizinga's sense, both physically and ideologically, which operates in accordance with joking's rules of challenge and negotiation. This is both a force for societal good and a potential source of harm." On the one hand, this may enable a relatively safe space for critique, and on the other hand legitimise conservative viewpoints (Bonello Rutter Giappone, Francis, MacKenzie 2018), while buttressing itself against critique by invoking the questionable 'just a joke' defense (see Quirk 2015, pp. 74-77; Billig 2005a, p. 27) - a rhetorical device that seems to provide an umbrella licence to say all, and to justify any offensiveness.

Stand-up is also finding productive ways to engage with the digital medium, including games. A hybrid kind of stand-up performance has been performed in *Second Life* (Linden Lab 2003; see Carr 2020) and *DayZ* (Bohemia Interactive 2013; see Hudson 2015), as well as

using PlayStation Home (London Studio 2008; see Hudson 2011; Hudson 2014). This stand-up positions itself on the boundary between live and mediatised performance and of course, disrupts the assumptions underlying such a distinction; though this sometimes takes place through a comically awkward interplay. There have also been stand-up games – the game *Comedy Quest* (Trav Nash 2015) is a nostalgic stand-up point-and-click adventure; while the multiplayer *Comedy Night* (Lighthouse Games Studio 2017) shows the possible outcome of intensified toxicity when a 'safe space' is fortified by the converging double licenses of 'just a game' and 'just a joke' (see Caldwell 2017, 2019). One can watch a 'stand-up show' in *Leisure Suit Larry III: Passionate Patti in Pursuit of the Pulsating Pectorals* (Sierra On-Line 1989), where Larry/the player is prompted to enter "three favourite ethnic groups" at the start, to be inserted into the stream of jokes – "I've got enough jokes to insult anyone!" – a meta-comic device that can be critical (revealing the arbitrariness and interchangeability of jokes' targets) but which may also seem problematically trivialising, partly depending on the player's input and attitude, as the jokes delivered are variously silly or knowingly tasteless.

The association with trivialisation brought up by critics of both games and comedy has been hard to shake off. While as noted above, games are frequently seen as being at odds with the comic, one reason may lie in perception – Muttoni, for example, suggests that developers may aim to assert seriousness for legitimacy's sake, to resist the trivialisation that may be implied in the label 'game', which humour would reinforce (in Manilève 2020). However, the medium-specific association between 'game', 'humour', and 'trivialisation', is one that has sometimes seemingly been tacitly accepted by game developers and players themselves, making it trickier to address. Commenting on US 'cold war' games (which manifested, in their frame for the "dramaturgy" of war, an uncanny confluence with the digital interface and technological mediation of cold warfare), John Wills (2019, pp. 105-108) notes that in their reception, such video games "seemed far less successful than other media in promoting critical thought". He attributes this partly to the "dark comedy", "humor and farce" (as opposed to "serious comment or realism") of the kinds of satire favoured by such games as *Nuclear War* (New World Computing 1989).

The risk that both humour (see Holm 2017, p. 26) and games (Chapman and Linderoth, 2015) may be perceived as trivialising leaves them open to critique on this front. On the other hand, the perception of humour as 'trivial' is also precisely the assumption that underpins and enables the accusations of 'humourlessness' (see Rob Gallagher's chapter in this book) sometimes levelled against those who deem a joke offensive (Jacobson 1997), and the

mutually reinforcing defenses 'it's just a joke' or 'it's just a game' (on the latter, see Darshana Jayemanne and Cameron Kunzelman's chapter in this book).

While acknowledging that trivialisation may occur of course, we also submit that humour in (and through and around) games also has the capacity to draw our attention to the game form itself, as well as to context and social issues. The chapters in this volume demonstrate what stands to be gained from taking the relationship between comedy, humour, and play seriously.

Existing scholarship on humour and comedy in games has tended to fall into one or more of the three main branches of humour theory: superiority, incongruity, and relief/release (McDonald 2012; Morreall 2009), and this book also offers some variations on these. We will therefore offer a brief overview here, as a way of both recognising prior work in the area, and anticipating the contributions in the following pages.

Trivialisation, in the sense of cutting one's perceived opponent down to size (Freud 2001, p. 103) supports the assertion of dominance and superiority. A foundation for *superiority theories* of humour can be found in Plato, who associated laughter with "malice" and hostility towards others (58-59, 49b-50a). Thomas Hobbes sees laughter as self-inflating via a sudden "apprehension of some deformed thing in another" (1968 [1651], p. 125). In his book *The Game of Humor* (1997), Gruner (though perhaps generalising too far) identifies a fundamental similarity between humour and games in a shared competitive dynamic, closely bound up with 'winning'.

A sudden distancing effect resulting in the momentary "anaesthesia of the heart" is key to laughter in Henri Bergson's view (1980). We laugh at the hapless failure to adapt and be flexible (Bergson 1980, pp. 150, 187), or at the excessive flailing and floundering produced when one mechanically attempts to apply learned behaviour inappropriately (think of Wile E. Coyote's legs still spinning uselessly in air, halfway across a chasm). This kind of laughter also seems to reassure us about our own superiority.

However, the relationship between rigidity ("mechanical inelasticity") and its obstacle in the Bergsonian view (as further discussed below) often becomes more than a simple opposition, and the comic may reside in or emerge from their very interaction - with the joys of excessive movement, collisions, and playful destruction linking games to slapstick comedy (Švelch 2014; Hudson 2014; Garin 2015). This kind of humour therefore simultaneously lends itself to analysis through the branches of humour and comedy theories that focus on incongruity.

Incongruity seems to be the most versatile of the three branches of theory (in fact, it usually has a part to play in the other two). Early theories of incongruity highlighted the laughter liable to arise from the lack of correspondence between expectation and delivered result – whether the unfulfilled expectation dissolves "into nothing" (Kant 2007, p. 162); or a gap becomes apparent between a concept and the 'real objects' that supposedly correspond to it (Schopenhauer 1969, p. 59) Another influential articulation of the incongruity approach is the bisociation theory, explored and applied by Daniel Heßler and Sebastian Möring in this volume.

Broadly speaking, *release theories* of humour such as Freud's (2001) suggest the sublimation of some desire or emotion that cannot be directly expressed or acted upon in society. Benign violation theory, as applied to video games by Wyatt Moss-Wellington and Paul Martin in this book, suggests a similar mechanism for containing and re-channelling perceived threats into 'benign' challenges. Relief/release could be less highly-charged, however, simply functioning to provide a 'break' from the action or main missions. Even the most earnest of games may provide the occasional respite through occasional comic relief or interludes – for example, side quests in *The Elder Scrolls* games (Bethesda 1994-; see also Dorman and Biddle 2009).

Video Games and the Culture of Laughter

Even though video games are commonly considered a "new medium" emerging from the technological advancements of the Cold War era (Dovey and Kennedy 2006), the analysis of humour in games reveals their deep and multifaceted relationship with traditional and vernacular cultures, as analysed by Alesha Serada and Manuel Garin in this volume. Games can preserve centuries-old folk jokes and traditional comic performance, providing a new, digital frame for them. The abundance of slapstick jokes across various game genres - both intentional, inserted by designers, and accidental, caused by the game engine – provides a handy example. The simple efficiency of the slapstick comedy of absurd violence is another indication of digital games being the vehicle of universally understood, traditional humour (see Peacock 2014).

Such connections are yet again counterintuitive, as digital games are rarely considered folk culture, being part of the global tech and entertainment industries (Dyer-Witheford, De Peuter 2009), with roots in military technology. It is to be stressed, however, that the early digital

games were created by aficionados rather than professionals, and vernacular practices greatly contributed toward the creation of digital games conventions and practices (Swalwell 2021). Such homebrew games often relied on folk and vernacular humour to amplify their playfulness or to convey a political message (Švelch 2018).

Satire, often including tasteless or offensive humorous material, is also a major force behind the creation of gamer communities, who readily ridicule the particularities of video games, their own customs, and deviations from their code of conduct, as illustrated by Mateusz Felczak, Petri Saarikoski et al., and Agata Zarzycka in this volume. As Michael P. Wolf argues, such in-jokes can increase a sense of unity and group cohesion by preemptively framing potential criticism as an encouraged behaviour, uniting the group members through their awareness of their own shortcomings and their acceptance of them as part of their identity: "We collectively acknowledge the unorthodox nature of our behavior, but by doing so among similarly unorthodox people, we indirectly endorse that sort of practice. [...] Coming from one of our own, we assume that no malice is intended and the joke is taken back because someone who shares our position cannot reasonably be thought to be exercising some sort of power relation over us." (2002, p. 340) Ridiculing games and poking fun at gamer-typical behaviour and expectations seem to be a common and lasting element of game-related culture, resulting in a mixture of self-mockery and sincere engagement, as discussed by Rory Summerley and Nele van de Mosselaer in this volume.

The universal and vernacular aspects of comedy in digital games and the self-referential humour of gamer communities can be also related to the larger and older cultural undercurrent, identified and explained by Mikhail Bakhtin as "the culture of laughter" (Bakhtin 1984b), and to its most famous component, the carnivalesque. This prevalent yet unofficial culture of laughter can be perceived as a continuum – uniting various folk festivals such as Roman Saturnalia and the Medieval urban carnival with playful art, literature and theatre (Bakhtin 1984a, 1984b), presenting the world, human beings and higher powers as equally pitiful and deserving of playful mockery. They provoke carnival laughter: an ambivalent force mocking both the serious values the community observes, and the jokers themselves, stressing equality and fraternity within the community and appreciating that which is usually subjected to humiliation: the grotesque, disfigured and obscene. According to Bakhtin, such ritualistic carnival laughter allowed for the renewal of the values the community lives by. From the playful celebration, the carnivalesque is born: the artistic rendition of the philosophy of laughter, using techniques such as transgression, the grotesque

and parody to test the limits of the social mores. Bakhtin tracks the succession of carnivalesque narrative genres from ancient satire through Medieval parodies and modern novels.

The carnivalesque turned out to be a concept more enduring and versatile than a mere method of literary criticism, and has been successfully applied to the study of both cinema (Stam 1989, Flanagan 2009) and digital games, with several authors considering outright satirical content in game such as *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (Rockstar North 2005; see Annandale 2006), *Grand Theft Auto IV* (Rockstar North 2008; see Butler 2010), *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar North 2013; see Mortensen and Jørgensen 2020), *Wolfenstein: New Order* (MachineGames 2014; see Schmeink 2014) or *Wolfenstein II: New Colossus* (MachineGames 2017; see Backe 2018) to be grotesque expressions of carnival laughter in digital gaming. But the influence of the carnivalesque on digital games is not exclusively related to satirical content: the entire form of the single-player action or adventure game may be also perceived as highly carnivalised, with the usual signifiers of the carnivalesque seen in the grotesque bodies of monsters (Mejeur 2018, Švelch 2019) and protagonists alike, the over-abundance of enemies to be defeated and treasures to be collected, or in the dominance of playful violence as a basic form of interaction (Klevjer 2006, Majkowski 2014, 2015, 2019).

Consider the well-known passage from *Gargantua and his son Pantagruel* (Rabelais 1894), the book Bakhtin considered a pinnacle of carnivalesque literature (Bakhtin 1984b), in which Garngantua drowns a large number of Parisians by urinating on them from the Notre Dame Cathedral tower: "He untied his fair braguette, and drawing out his mentul into the open air, he so bitterly all-to-bepissed them, that he drowned two hundred and sixty thousand, four hundred and eighteen, besides the women and little children." (1894, p. 89) This passage can be easily imagined as a video game episode, as the protagonist's gaining of a height advantage to unleash an unorthodox weapon upon a large number of enemies through special mechanics is commonplace scene in open-world adventure games, from *Assassin's Creed Brotherhood* (Ubisoft 2010) to *Horizon Zero Dawn* (Guerilla Games 2017), or *Ghost of Tsushima* (Sucker Punch 2020). The strange arsenal is also a common source of comedy in games such as *Saints Row: The Third* (Volition 2011), *Ratchet and Clank* (Insomniac Games 2002), *Borderlands* (Gearbox Software 2009), and *Superhero League of Hoboken* (Meretzky 1994), the latter of which features weapons such as 'baking soda and vinegar rocket' or 'arsenic-tipped deer antlers'. The main difference therefore seems to be the obscenity of

Rabeleais' passage, as video games tend to avoid depicting genitalia or urine, with a few overtly comedic exceptions, such as the aforementioned *Saints Row* series.

Even though digital games rarely deal directly with carnivalesque obscenity, comedy has been the dominant way of depicting human sexuality in the medium ever since *Leisure Suit Larry in the Land of the Lounge Lizards* (Sierra On-Line 1987) and similar adult-oriented adventure games helped establish a strong connection between the erotic imaginary, solving puzzles and delivering (frequently quite crude) jokes (Karhulahti and Bonello Rutter Giappone 2021). This strong connection is illustrated in this volume in both Samuel Poirier-Poulin's and Caroline Bem's chapters. Even though neither author mentions the carnivalesque explicitly, the erotic games they are analysing – different as they may be – share the tendency to transgress boundaries, depict intercourse in a playful manner, and present various form of grotesque unions of a human and a non-human in form of an animal, or even anthropomorphic object. Many erotic games, such as *Lula: The Sexy Empire* (Interactive Strip 1998), *Gal*Gun* (Inti Creates 2011), *HuniePop* (HuniePot 2015) and *Hentai Heroes* (Kinkoïd 2017), among others, use humour to create a permissive frame for the presentation of erotic content without being accused of pornography, or to defend highly questionable content as 'just a joke'. An extreme example of such strategy, based on an assumption that comedy and games share a license for delivering so-called 'innocent' delight, and its use to justify problematic content, is this game company's defense of one of the most controversial games of all time:

> American Multiple Industries adamantly defended the title [*Custer's Revenge* (1982), which featured the rape of a Native American woman as a goal]. President Stuart Kesten explained, "Our object is not to arouse, our object is to entertain." He added, "When people play our games, we want them smiling, *we want them laughing*." (Wills 2019, p. 70; emphasis added)

Framing of pornographic and racist content as both 'just a game' and 'just a joke' reveals the basic problem with the carnivalesque as described by Bakhtin – namely, its oft-criticised unfailing optimism regarding the democratising power of laughter. According to his critics, the over-optimistic Bakhtinian perspective can in fact prevent lasting social change through reinforcement of the oppressive structures of power (Stallybrass and White 1986), with the utopian notion of the communal character of laughter not only belittling the suffering of those who are the object of the cruel jokes, but also being used to normalise abusive behaviour as playful while correcting rebellious behaviour as deviant (Billig 2005b). The concept itself can

be seen as inseparably tied to the historical context of the Stalinist regime, and may perhaps even stem from a fascination with the murderous autocrat (Groys 2017). All these arguments provide additional perspectives on the carnivalesque, reminding us that carnival laughter can be cruel, and that the renewal of the communal bonds may occur at the expense of the marginalised and the excluded.

The problem with the uncritical implementation of comedy as a justification for abuse is highlighted by several authors of this volume. Like irony (White 1973, p. 38), comedy and humour may be 'transideological'—that is, they "can be made to 'happen' by (and to) anyone of any political persuasion" (Hutcheon 2000, p. 199) – whence springs the possibility of ambivalence (even ethical) at their very core. This, again, highlights similarities between comedy and the notion of play: both can be either community-building freeing exercises or tools of oppression. In the latter case, they provide fun only for certain participants, who exploit their privileged position to make fun/play at the expense of those who are oppressed, marginalised or directly subjugated (see Billig 2005 for comedy, Trammel 2020 for play). There is a fine line between carnivalesque ridiculing of shared values, brave satire against the tyrants, and cruel mockery of others from the platform of smug conviction in one's superiority (Bakhtin 1981, 1986).

Despite all these misgivings, the idea of the carnivalesque being a foundation for many digital game genres is reinforced by the major comedic strategies. This volume shows the important role of parody and satire. Even though, as already stated, the medium itself creates a lot of space for physical humour and comic performances, the combinatoric nature of video games, which readily allows for the merging of elements from previous titles, aligns with the self-parodying tendency of game culture and contributes toward the openness of the medium to parody (see Bonello Rutter Giappone 2015). Creating parody by combining easily recognisable elements of commonly known games can create satirical critical commentary on game genres, conventions and development practices as argued by Sebastian Möring and Rory Summerley in the volume. Satire can also be aimed at external phenomena, and openly political caricature utilising well-known gameplay conventions in fact played a significant role in the formation of early game cultures, as described by Filip Jankowski in this volume.

This tendency towards self-awareness, parody (ridiculing another text by highlighting its easily recognisable qualities, usually in comic manner) and satire (mocking extra-textual phenomena, such as customs or social mores) might be attributed to both the playful attitude and the gatekeeping practices of the gamer community, as parody generally assumes

knowledge of the original (Hutcheon 1984) – in this case, the presumed canon of digital games and the inner knowledge of game development practices. Although these points are valid, one can also claim that the high incidence of parody and satire in games, the ease with which games accommodate these modes, and their increasing penetration into mainstream genres, points to a more fundamental quality of games. Parody here serves not only to directly mock the parodied text or to ridicule the deviation from aesthetic norms, or expose rules and conventions. It can also serve as a genre-forming force, as the mocking repetition also serves to introduce new qualities (Nycz 2000). Even if seen as a "countergenre" (Guillén (1971) rather than a genre in itself – being a force that reveals genre conventions and structures – the innovative aspects of a parody can lead to the formation of new genres (Bakhtin 1984a).

It could therefore be claimed that the early modern novel was born as a parody of the chivalrous romance, with *Don Quixote* as a paradigmatic example (See Bakhtin 1981). A similar story can be traced in digital games, with popular genres created from the parody of a preceding form. For example, the early first-person shooter *Wolfenstein 3D* (id Software 1992) was (supposedly) born from the attempt to re-make a slow-paced immersive computer role-playing game [cRPG] *Ultima Underworld* (Blue Sky Productions 1992) as the fast-moving, challenging experience of an arcade game, based on a similar technology (Elrod 2009, Klevjer 2006). The result was a game parodying (perhaps unwittingly) both the first-person cRPG genre, highlighting the lack of speed and excitement in dungeon crawlers and mocking both the attempt to create a coherent world and the seriousness of the Second World War-themed games, including the quite sensible *Castle Wolfenstein* (Muse Software 1981). It also paved the way for the rise of the first-person shooter genre. Another example of new game titles and cross-media pollinations emerging from parody is provided and analysed in detail by Sebastian Möring in this volume.

Moreover, if parody is understood in Bakhtinian terms, as a grotesque exaggeration of the most distinct traits of the original – resulting in the creation of a grotesque double (Bakhtin 1984a, Morson 1989) – it may be understood as the driving concept behind narrative digital games: the simplified simulation of narrative genres being a parodic gesture at heart. Even if the game is not funny at all, or only potentially funny, the non-comical parody technique is at the very core of multiple game genres, forcing the player to repeat the sequence of major genre tropes over and over again. For example, from *Odyssey*, through chivalrous romance, *One Thousand and One Nights* all the way to fantasy novels, there is a trope of the

protagonist receiving or obtaining magical objects and performing various incredible deeds with their help. Usually, there is a single enchanted object in the narrative – or a few of them, all important. In numerous fantasy-themed RPGs such objects are raining left, right, and centre, forcing the player to compare their benefits, turn them into merchandise, and build the entire gameplay experience around the convergence of various items' power. Just imagine the hilarity of Bilbo Baggins trying to sell three magical rings because he already has so many enchanted rings he cannot squeeze more onto his fingers! Yet, the endless multiplication of benevolent magic in games does not strike players as particularly funny – though it is sometimes parodied, for example in the 2004 version of *Bard's Tale* (inXile Entertainment 2004).

Such repetition, exposing genre conventions, is commonplace in digital games: shooters offer hundreds of enemies to be killed, tomb-raiding games endlessly multiply trap-ridden ancient structures, fantasy role-playing games' goblin-infested hills discharge their respawning hordes at regular intervals, westerns force the protagonists into dozens of high-noon duels, and so on. The narrative digital game could therefore be considered a serio-comic form, with an algorithmic parody of literary or filmic conventions and tropes at its core (Glas 2015, Majkowski 2019).

The incredible machines of video game humour

Video games borrow from comic traditions of other media, and there have indeed been a number of adaptations of comedy material from literature, film, or television. Many of these have taken the form of text or point and click adventure games, for example *The Colour of Magic* (Delta 4 1986) and other Discworld games; *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (Infocom 1984); or *Monty Python* games (7th Level, 1994-1997). Adventure games have been the genre most consistently aligned with comedy (Grönroos 2013; Karhulahti and Bonello R. Giappone 2021), as they rely on puzzles whose solutions are often lodged in incongruity. Besides the potential for adaptation, however, games open up new, medium-specific approaches to humour and comedy. Medium-specificity can pertain to three basic, sometimes co-occurring, aspects of games : their computational nature and the simulated worlds they take place in; the interaction between the player and the game; and the conventions of game design.

As we mentioned above, the emergence of video games as a medium is tied to the technological advancements of the 20th century. Computers have traditionally been seen as instruments of rationality and progress. They surpass humans at many mechanical tasks; they can tirelessly run repetitive processes and replicate multitudes or virtual objects. Writing about computer-themed jokes, Shifman and Blondheim find that many of these express users' frustration: "Humor […] responds to the incompatibility of man and his mechanical prostheses. For however closely we interact with the computer, it remains the ultimate, outermost, other." (Shifman and Blondheim 2010, 1362) Several comedy films – such as the U.S. title *Desk Set* (Lang 1957) – play on the premise that an "electronic brain" could replace people, in this case librarians (Friedman 2005). This idea is soon revealed as foolish, in part because computers lack human sensitivity and in part because one of the librarians to be replaced is played by Katherine Hepburn, commonly understood as irreplaceable.

The idea of a computer making or understanding jokes might seem similarly absurd. Although laugher has been recently identified in great apes (Davila Ross, Owren and Zimmermann, 2009), it was long thought to be a specifically human form of expression, with Aristotle noting that humans "are the only creatures that laugh" (1937, 281, section 673a 8). One of the longest-running jokes in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987-1994) is the inability of Commander Data's AI to master the appreciation and execution of humour – his rigidity itself being held up as the object of the audience's laughter. Similarly, in one of Stanisław Lem's short stories from *Star Diaries* (1985), Ijon Tichy endows his starship's electronic brain with the ability to tell jokes, and quickly starts to resent it due to its repetitiveness and inability to time jokes correctly. Nevertheless, significant effort has been invested into computational agents that would be able to generate or process jokes, including robotic stand-up comedians, but according to a recent review study, we are still "far from robots that have autonomous humorous behavior" (Nijholt 2018, 407). Video games, instead, use computer technology – and its specific affordances and constraints – as co-creators and catalysts of comedy.

For one, simulated worlds of video games allow one to play out absurd 'what-if' scenarios, offering opportunities for humorous incongruities. *Ultimate Epic Battle Simulator* (Brilliant Game Studios 2017) became a viral hit in 2017 thanks to YouTube videos such as the one pitting 1,000 T-Rexes against 80,000 chickens (the T-Rexes won!). Part of their appeal lies in the very fact that something so frivolous is being simulated with advanced technology. In the game's description on the Steam digital storefront, the developer explains that to display this

many chickens (or soldiers), he had to create "the most powerful crowd rendering system ever conceived in Unity engine." Then there are the ridiculous battles themselves. Since the match-ups are not pre-defined, the players can create incongruous combinations from an eclectic assortment of army types. This combinatoric potential of video game humour is also mentioned by Gallagher in this book when writing about the *Hitman* series – the games' ostensible goal is to assassinate a target, but in the process the player may explore the multiple bizarre ways this can be achieved. While some games – such as *The Incredible Machine* (Jeff Tunnell Productions 1993) – explicitly simulate Rube Goldberg machines, others mimic them by letting players find ridiculous solutions to straightforward problems, echoing Suits's definition of games mentioned above. In the adventure game *Deponia* (Daedalic Entertainment 2012), the amateur and accident-prone 'inventor' Rufus would refuse to pick up anything too obviously practical, with the comment "who needs fabulous all-round tools anyway?".

Interlocking systems of contemporary games produce instances of "emergent" humour that may be "generated through player actions." (Dormann 2014, 84). Such comedy may not be scripted, but is in many cases anticipated and designed as a possible outcome. While games can partially simulate real-life physics and basic human behaviours, such simulations are usually simplified or exaggerated. Scott Bukatman compares video game physics to the "cartoon physics" of *Looney Tunes* or *Tom and Jerry*. He finds video game physics significantly tamer but argues that "cartoon physics still lurks within the more realistic physics of game engines, as its uncanny, playful double: the cartoon cat in the machine." (Bukatman 2014, 313). Unrealistic physics make video game worlds into arenas for physical humour – a phenomenon investigated in this book by Garin through the example of *Super Smash Bros* (Hal Laboratory 1999). We do not have to stop at games for kids, however. The physics of the *Grand Theft Auto* games (such as Rockstar North 2008) seem vaguely realistic, but allow for car crashes that are much more kinetic than the real-life ones, imbuing an otherwise tragic 'accident' with slapstick qualities and creating opportunities for comedy compilations of "100 ways to die in GTA " (Bobisuruncle54 2010).

These 'mischief' videos betray a fascination with the possibilities of the medium and resemble the *mischief gags* of early silent cinema famously discussed by Tom Gunning (1995). One of the more common examples of cartoonish physics are *ragdolls*, physical models of limp bodies tumbling to the ground. As Amanda Phillips points out, "ragdolls balance a desire for realism with a desire for entertainment. They are notoriously glitchy in

gamespaces and are well known for providing unintentional comedy when they cause bodies to fly improbably through space or settle in provocative or humorous positions." (Phillips 2018, 139) Sometimes, skilled players take advantage of the flaws in the game's software and create absurdist slapstick out of glitches and errors (Švelch 2014). In this volume, van de Mosselaer mentions glitches as a way of revealing the tentative, constructed nature of video game worlds. Their humorous effect may therefore stem from an unexpected step into the unknown, as described by Georges Bataille:

> We laugh, in short, in passing very abruptly, all of a sudden, from a world in which everything is firmly qualified, in which everything is given as stable within a generally stable order, into a world in which our assurance is overwhelmed, in which we perceive that this assurance was deceptive. (Bataille, 1986, p. 60)

While capable of many awesome things, computers have little understanding of social context and human intention; they will execute even the most absurd commands until someone stops them, and therefore exhibit what Bergson has called "mechanical inelasticity" (1980). This inelasticity is inherited by the simulated characters of video games, whose artificial intelligence often appears limited or obtuse. In some games, this becomes apparent when the system malfunctions, as shown in Zarzycka's chapter for this book. Other games, however, purposefully use this for comedic effect – such as *Lemmings* (DMA Design 1991), a game that features crowds of tiny green-haired humanoids who blindly march forward, even if it means certain death. While the game's ostensible goal is to save them, it also revels in their comedic deaths, making fun of their missing sense of self-preservation. While serving as vehicles to ridicule simple computation (and thus express the superiority of the human over the machine), *Lemmings* also evoke a strong sense of incongruity – they are a bit like people, but not quite. We may care about them but do not *have to*, as they are virtual entities that will accept neglect and torture. Something similar can also be said about the tiny artificial beings of *The Sims* (Maxis 2000) or *Worms* (Team 17 1995), both of which are also cast as comedic.

Besides their computational nature, another defining feature of video games is their interactivity, sometimes called *ergodicity* (Aarseth 1997). We have already discussed the ways in which the player can wreak havoc in virtual worlds – but the joke can also be on the players. As van de Mosselaer and Gallagher's chapters note, a whole subgenre of indie games – so-called *fumblecore* --– has specialised in ridiculing player effort. In his insightful analysis of games like *Surgeon Simulator* (Bossa Studios 2013), Ian Bryce Jones points out their "playful perversion of the expected relation between player and avatar." (Jones 2016, 88) The

title's intentionally cumbersome controls – such as the need to control each finger separately – make even picking up a scalpel into a challenge, and most of the players' early attempts at surgery end in a pool of blood. The gameplay experience turns into "a comedic brawl" between the player and a computer, producing what Jones calls "dehiscent performance" (2016, 89). While fumblecore's reliance on human-computer interaction makes it medium-specific, Jones finds precursors of dehiscent performance in split-personality comedic performances, such as the one portrayed by Steve Martin in *All of Me* (Reiner 1984).

As Dooley Murphy puts it in his chapter about interactive gags, games can also "trick us into performing actions that work against our interests." To give a particularly effective example: In a scene from *Psychonauts* (Double Fine Productions 2005), a platformer/adventure game lauded for its sense of humour, Razputin (the main character) receives an important mission from a non-player character called Ford Cruller, who serves as Razputin's mentor. At the end of the conversation, Cruller asks Razputin: "Are you ready?" The player can choose between the answers "Yes!" and "No. Not yet." If they choose the latter, Ford slaps Razputin across the face and asks "How about now?" The same choice is presented again, and the loop will continue until the player concedes that Razputin *is* ready. Besides its unexpected physicality and impeccable timing upon the dialogue cue, the gag cleverly subverts game design conventions. Games commonly offer an option to delay the start of a next major quest so that the player can conclude unfinished tasks or gather more resources. Here, the option is shown to be illusory – and the revelation is immediate and in-your-face.

Subversion of game design conventions in general is a common way of surprising players and creating incongruity. Besides the *Psychonauts* example, many other games use deception – over and above misdirection – to joke at the expense of the player or player character. In the 3D puzzle game *Portal* (Valve 2007), the player receives instructions from a seemingly friendly AI called GLaDOS, who motivates the player (and the player character) to solve spatial puzzles with the promise of a cake. Over the course of the game, GLaDOS becomes more and more insulting and villainous and the cake is famously discovered to be a lie; Grewell, McAllister and Ruggill even conclude that the game uses "ridicule as game mechanic" (2015). In part, the joke is on the player who obediently follows the orders given by the video game instructions. Other titles such as *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Cafe 2013) similarly play with "the productive friction between author, narrator, protagonist, and recipient" (Backe and Thon 2019, p. 19) to create cerebral, meta-referential comedy in which the trickster-narrator undermines the efforts of the player and the player has room to

'misbehave'. While exposing the conventions of video game mechanics and narratives, meta-referential comedy may also signal a game's artistic ambitions by imitating formal hyper-awareness of postmodern art (see Hutcheon 1984, Jameson 1991, Nycz 2000).

In some cases, subversion of design conventions creates whole new parodic genres, as we have glimpsed in the case of 'simulator' games. Simulation software was, in its original sense, intended to represent real-life processes for scientific, administrative, or education purposes. The genre of games called 'simulators' had started with earnest attempts at representing real vehicles, airplanes, or complex processes such as urban planning. Today, parodic simulators like *Surgeon Simulator* (Bossa Studios 2013)*, Goat Simulator* (Coffee Stain Studios 2014)*, Totally Accurate Battle Simulator* (Landfall 2019), or the above-mentioned *Ultimate Epic Battle Simulator* threaten to outnumber the earnest ones. To an extent, this is an effect of the contemporary meme culture that thrives on irony and stylistic subversions (see Phillips and Milner 2017). At the same time, these 'simulators' also reveal that any simulation of real-life phenomena is ultimately arbitrary and can never be fully objective or realistic. Similar subversions documented throughout this book deconstruct the calcified norms and conventions of game design, echoing Mulkay's observation (1988, 130) that "the humour that occurs in formal structures is closely linked to their inherent contradictions."

Anticipating Punch-lines: Chapter Introductions

The first section, "Scaffolding and how to fall off it: Theories and concepts", offers various approaches to comedy in video games, more or less generalisable, taking into account such foundational aspects as player position, the terms of interaction, and the games' medium-specific features.

The perceived opposition between the comic and digital games seems to lie, for some, in the very participation of the player:

> "Perhaps the biggest reason that games aren't funny is the difficulty of integrating comedy into game play. […] 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? Can you make a gamer actually commit comedy?" (Totilo 2004)

A number of chapters in this volume directly challenge this (e.g. those by van de Mosselaer, Murphy, and Garin). Engaging with philosophical traditions in thinking about comedy – drawing upon Bergson and Baudelaire in particular – van de Mosselaer's chapter describes how the duality of the player's positioning creates suitable conditions for the player to become both comic object and laughing subject.

Dooley Murphy addresses the perception that games do not do humour well. His chapter explores a medium-specific variant of the comic, offering an approach to 'interactive gags' that challenges the idea that comic timing is crucial to the delivery of a gag; he offers an insight into how game design may anticipate and make use of the player's active participation, where the player provides the cue (sometimes unawares) to trigger the gag.

The point and click adventure game genre is often seen to rely heavily on verbal humour:

> "We lacked the technology and animation budget to [show more than] the characters walking, lifting their arms, and maybe crouching. It was therefore necessary to massively rely instead on words. […] I think today, with the way games have evolved, it's a little more difficult to be funny, to win approval for humorous adventure games like *Monkey Island*" (Grossman in Vincent Manilève, 2020, our translation).

Complicating this, Daniel Heßler's semiotic approach goes beyond the verbal, by linking Dynel's garden-path theory of jokes to the ludic and mechanical structures of the games' puzzles. Puzzle punchlines, with their base in ambiguity and their resolution of incongruity, are analysed through bisociation theory, as they play out in that leading exemplar of the genre - *The Secret of Monkey Island* (Gilbert 1990).

Similarly, Mauel Garin describes the ways in which traditional comedy performances and folk humour could influence both design choices and the way a game is understood. He highlights the fact that technological mediation as well as global circulation of digital games can reveal striking similarities between pre-modern theatre genres, arising independently in Japan and Europe. Such background allows for a game to create an environment allowing players to perform commonly recognisable gags without the physical skill required of clowns or silent movie performers.

In the final chapter of the first section, Wyatt Moss-Wellington and Paul Martin employ benign violation theory to present humour as a central quality behind the puzzle structure in digital games. To illustrate this perspective, they go beyond the realm of comedy games, exploring how the playfulness of puzzles in *Limbo* (Playdead 2010) and *Braid* (Number None

2009) - two 'indie' platformer games not usually considered comedic - results in the production of dark humour during gameplay.

The second section, "Clowning Around: Contexts, Cultures, and Communities", includes chapters that place the games in their cultural context, or explore the conditions that games and their user communities produce as a surrounding games culture. The chapters in this section show that humour in and around in video games is an important tool for defining and maintaining player communities.

The chapter by Petri Saarikoski, Antti Lindfors, Jaakko Suominen, and Markku Reunanen documents the legacy of an elaborate April Fool's prank by semi-professional journalists writing for a 1980s Finnish gaming magazine. They made up a fictional game called *Illuminatus*, which parodied but also embodied the dreams and desires of gamers at the time. Although non-existent, *Illuminatus* became a common point of reference within the Finnish gaming community, which has in turn kept its legacy alive.

Alesha Serada explores the relationship between the rise of the Russian game development scene and the vernacular culture of Soviet Union, exposing numerous similarities not only in the matter informing game content (namely, popular anecdotes), but also in their design structure and the way the analysed games fulfilled their community-building role as "anecdote reminders". They can therefore be perceived as another incarnation of the centuries-old tradition of absurd folk humour, which transgressed boundaries and languages barriers.

Filip Jankowski's chapter focuses on satirical games made during the French political crisis of 1984-1986. In his close readings of three darkly comical games, he uncovers their roots in the economic, political, and existential concerns of French citizens and shows that satire has been an important element of video game design since its early days.

Sebastian Möring explores the productivity of fan-made game parodies using the theory of bisociation. His analysis of numerous playful redesigns of *Tetris* (Pajitnov et al. 1984), as both playable games and comic cartoons, reveals the artistic and political potential of parodying, as it results in inventing new play conventions and challenges for a game, while commenting on the identity of Tetris as a game and the neoliberal underpinnings of digital entertainment.

Agata Zarzycka examines community-made comedy videos that ridicule the behaviours of players and player characters, especially in role-playing games. By turning in-game events

into live-action sketches, the videos reveal the absurdity of arbitrary game mechanics, unmask the fragility of game software, or poke fun at newbie players. Zarzycka interprets these videos as tools of self-fashioning - means of defining player identity, strengthening the community, and differentiating it from the outside world.

In the final chapter of this section, Mateusz Felczak investigates the role of humour in live coverage of large-scale eSports events, noting its emergent and ephemeral qualities. While acknowledging that this humour may often be offensive, he finds that it provides "a corporeal respite from the formulaic developments of live-streamed professional gameplay" and creates a festive and carnival-like atmosphere.

The title of the third section, "Six Ways to Spoil A Joke: Case Studies", ironically repurposes the common complaint that analysing a joke amounts to spoiling it. We believe that, on the contrary, in-depth exploration of the comic in particular games or series is necessary for both critique and deeper appreciation of video game humour.

Darshana Jayemanne and Cameron Kunzelman's chapter focuses on race and humour in digital games, with particular attention to irony. Like Saarikoski, Lindfors, Suominen, and Reunanen, they examine a persisting memory in game culture of a non-existent phenomenon – Gandhi's incongruously out-of-character eruption into hyper-aggression, due to a mythical overflow error in *Civilization II* (MicroProse 1996), perpetuated as a gamer meme. The authors explore the web of technical, social and cultural factors that contribute to the hilarity of the meme. Developing existing theories of irony through an application of Bhabha's commentary on 'sly civility', they propose the term 'cybernetic irony' for such techno-racial collective mediations.

Samuel Poirier-Poulin presents an optimistic perspective on comedy in games, focusing on the way *Coming Out on Top* (Obscurasoft 2014) employs the conventions of the comedic visual novel to offer a safe space for LGBTQ+ players. By replacing the common trope of presenting gay life as either tragic or deviant with lighthearted erotic comedy, the game allows gay players to freely express their sexuality and identity in a virtual environment in a positive and playful way.

Rory Summerley's chapter conducts a close reading of the game *Travis Strikes Again: No More Heroes* (Grasshopper Manufacture 2019) and of its attitude towards the games and gamers it refers to. The loving/critical ambivalence of the game's 'sincerely ironic' stance (explored through Hutcheon's and Kierkegaard's theories of irony) provokes reflection on the

gamers' own participation in an industry and games culture that are often unaware (or only selectively aware) of their own failings.

Also tackling ambivalence, Caroline Bem focuses on the palimpsestic relationship between the already-humorous indie game *Undertale* (Fox 2015) and the browser sex game *Uddertale* (Doxy 2016). She explores the differences and similarities as an instance of parody and pastiche, drawing in points of reference from other media, such as *American Pie* (Weitz 1999). The specificity of gamic parody – as it is manifested in this case study – is thus pursued through its intermedial and intertextual relations; she considers humour's ability to problematically disengage from ethical implications by maintaining ambivalence.

Rob Gallagher appreciates the humorous structures of *Hitman* games series, while posing serious questions about the distanced position of the joker. Gallagher not only points out the conservative agenda behind the game's premise, but also suggests alternatives – games offering a similar type of comedy that do not rely for their humour on political violence masquerading as dispensing justice.

While the authors of this volume provide broad and complex perspectives on numerous intersections between comedy and games and game culture, this first volume dedicated to the subject is just the tip of an iceberg. There are numerous topics still waiting to be explored, from the relationship between dread and comedy in horror games, to the effects of different kinds of NPC AI behaviour and characterisation such as the 'Nemesis system' (Monolith Productions 2014), to usage of game-inspired gags in both live-action and animated film. Research presented in the volume opens up numerous questions, both hopeful and critical, as humour and playfulness serve both as an alternative to earnest, often conservative and market-driven game culture and as an all-too-easy excuse to silence criticism of offensive, insensitive or harmful game content. But the ludo-comedic consonance runs deeper than delivering jokes and provoking laughter: as numerous authors of this volume demonstrate, there are deep, structural similarities between comedic and ludic matter. A comedy studies perspective is therefore extremely helpful in understanding not only the ostensibly humorous video game content, but also the general principles behind the medium's cultural specificity. The study of video games likewise expands comedy studies in new directions, with games offering novel means of participation and medium-specific techniques to generate humour. We hope this collection will provide inspiration for future studies on video games and comedy, casting even more light on their varied and entangled relationship.

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