

Jokes, Japes, and Jolly Jests: A Look at Comedy in Games and How to Use It

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Abstract

This deep dive document is centered around humour in games, investigating ways that comedy can be designed through the context of game design. Several theories of humour will be introduced to provide context and background to the rest of the paper. A case study of various comedic elements will be studied through their use in different comedy video games, revealing what has worked and hasn't worked for games overall. Finally, we discuss the results of our research and research conducted by others to formulate various ways that comedy can be utilized in game design.

Comedy? IN GAMES?

This Deep Dive is filmed in front of a live studio audience.

[insert Seinfeld intro]

“What’s the deal with comedy games anyways?”

A staple in nearly every other artistic medium available, comedy is often ignored in games. If this were a clickbait post, I would title it something like, “Comedy in Games and Why You’re Using It Wrong” (not you specifically. Well, maybe? I don’t know you). Many choose not to include it or haphazardly shuffle it in at the last minute. These often miss the point; you can’t land a punchline without any setup.

Does this mean that comedy has no place in the medium? Of course not. The question isn’t whether comedy belongs in video games, comedy absolutely does. Comedy games need to be supported, nurtured, raised like they were one of our own and forced to enter a cage match where only one combatant exits.

What we need to ask is **how can we design video games with comedy in mind?**

Punchline.

wHy Is ThIs FuNnY?

To provide some background, let's talk about some reasons why we think funny things are well, funny. This section isn't concerned at all about video games, rather the broader context in which we understand humour and humour theory.

Let's just get this out of the way, comedy is subjective.

There's no scientific formula for comedy. Anyone can have a taste or preference for different types of comedy. A fart joke could be the most gut-wrenchingly, hilarious thing one person may have encountered in their entire life, completely rewriting and recontextualizing everything that they have experienced before and firmly placing them in nirvana, the highest state that anyone can attain.

The next person could just breathe slightly harder out of their nostrils and move on.

As it stands, the main theories of humour are of **relief**, **superiority**, and **incongruity** (Morreall, 1983). These theories are the most commonly accepted theories of humour, and their origins date back hundreds of years.

Relief theory suggests that humour is primarily derived from a release of stress and is an indicator of pleasure.

Superiority theory suggests that humour is primarily derived from feeling triumphant or superior to others, or otherwise enjoying their misfortune.

Finally, incongruity theory suggests that humour is primarily derived from the unexpected or surprising.

However, many also believe that humour cannot be accurately theorized, as the listed methods simply reverse engineer what is already humorous.

Believing humour to be purposefully flexible, Max Eastman states that "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" (Eastman, 2009).

Perhaps most famously, E.B. White (writer of *Stuart Little*, *Charlotte's Web*, among other things) once said that "Humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the scientific mind" (White, 1941).

That being said, let's dive right into some video game frog guts.

Funny Fundamentals Explained Through Games

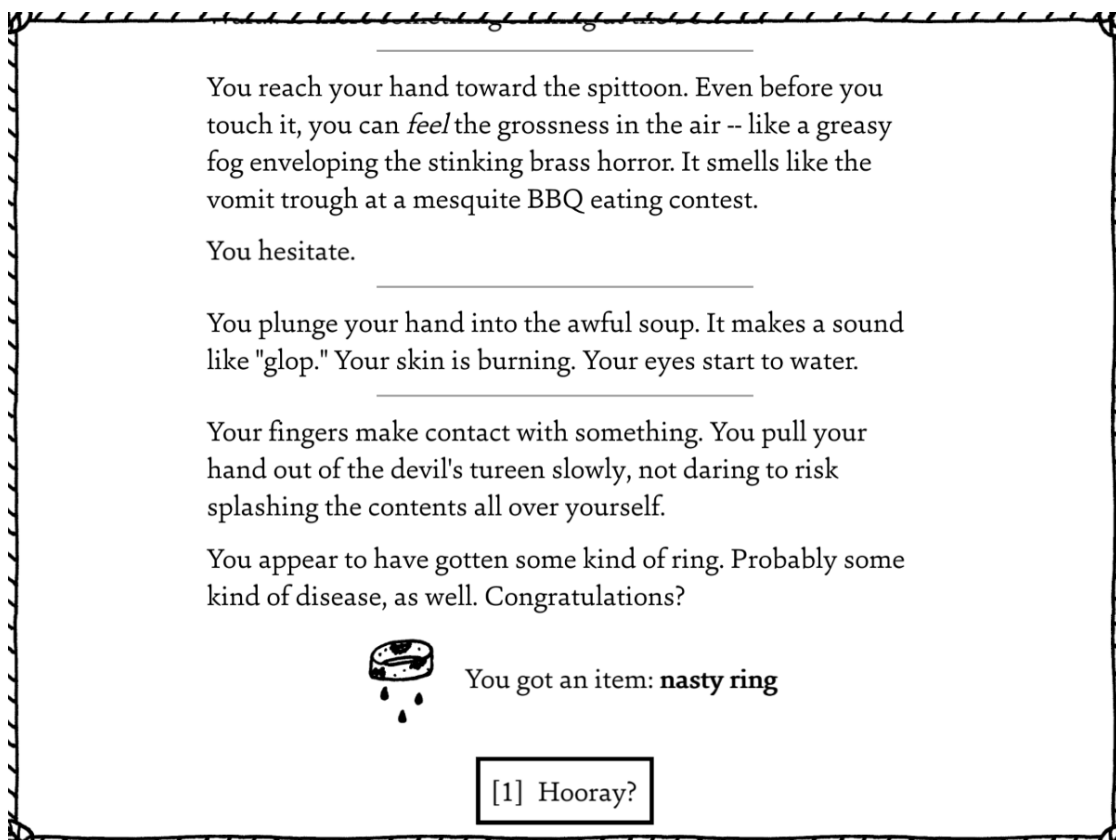
Let's look at some ways that games use comedy and look at examples of what works well and not so well.

Writing

Comedy writing seems to be the most abundant form of comedy by far. This is most likely because it's the "easiest to implement". All you need to do is write, right? Well, not quite. Comedy writing is difficult to get right. The phrase, "dying is easy, comedy is hard" is a testament to this.

"**West of Loathing**" is a western RPG in the most literal sense, it's about cowboys and stuff. It's also got a stick figure art style, a bold choice at first glance. But the simple and unpolished art style actually serves to complement and highlight the game's writing. Descriptions of violence or trauma are a lot more effective as comedy when every character is a stick figure.

Some of the best, most memorable writing in the game comes from the spittoons. Each one has some effect that the player can benefit from, BUT the player must constantly rummage through the vile jars of saliva to gain them. The narrator is in constant state of disgust at your willingness to desecrate yourself for a trinket, getting more and more outraged as the game progresses.



West of Loathing; First Spittoon

Another example of great comedic writing is in the “**Frog Detective**” series. These games feature the player as a frog detective (shocking, I know) who must interact with a variety of silly animals to solve cases. The games are very light-hearted and showcase some great examples of subtly absurd, almost farcical scenarios.



Frog Detective; Upon being told that everyone is a suspect

What I want to highlight here is that despite the vastly different tones and writing styles, both of these games succeed at comedy. Why is this?

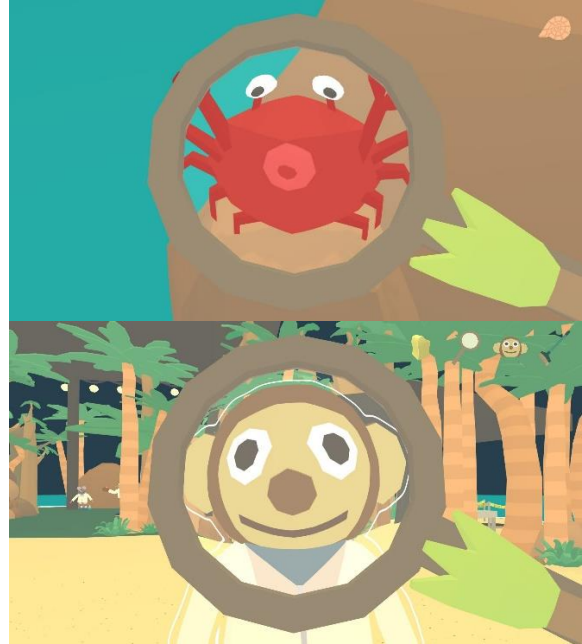
Kallio and Masoodian have several primary methods that they apply to ludonarrative comedy, which are: visual style, sources of comedy, and conflicts in comedy (Kallio, Masoodian, 2019).

Visual style describes the visuality of comedy, which is the aesthetic that the game provides to the player. Both of these games feature visual styles that work well with the type of humour that they are going for. The games' humour would not work if they were to use a style that doesn't lend itself well to comedy.

Sources of comedy refers to how is delivered. Types include humour-through-storytelling (written jokes, comedic scenes, visual gags), humour-through-mechanics (player is involved with the comedy process), and unintentional comedy (comedy through the corruption of the game, aka bugs). Both are very reliant on the first method, but the games do not shy away from including certain comedic elements through the second manner. For example, Frog Detective's magnifying glass is a functionally useless mechanic, but it does involve the player as a core part of that mechanic (the player examines their environment with the magnifying glass, enforcing the detective fantasy).



Frog Detective; Magnifying glass



Furthermore, Kallio and Masoodian describe what they refer to as “comedy enhancers”, or elements of narrative games that accentuate comic methods. We’ll get back to these later.

"I Understood That Reference."

The section title for references is a reference, has science gone too far?

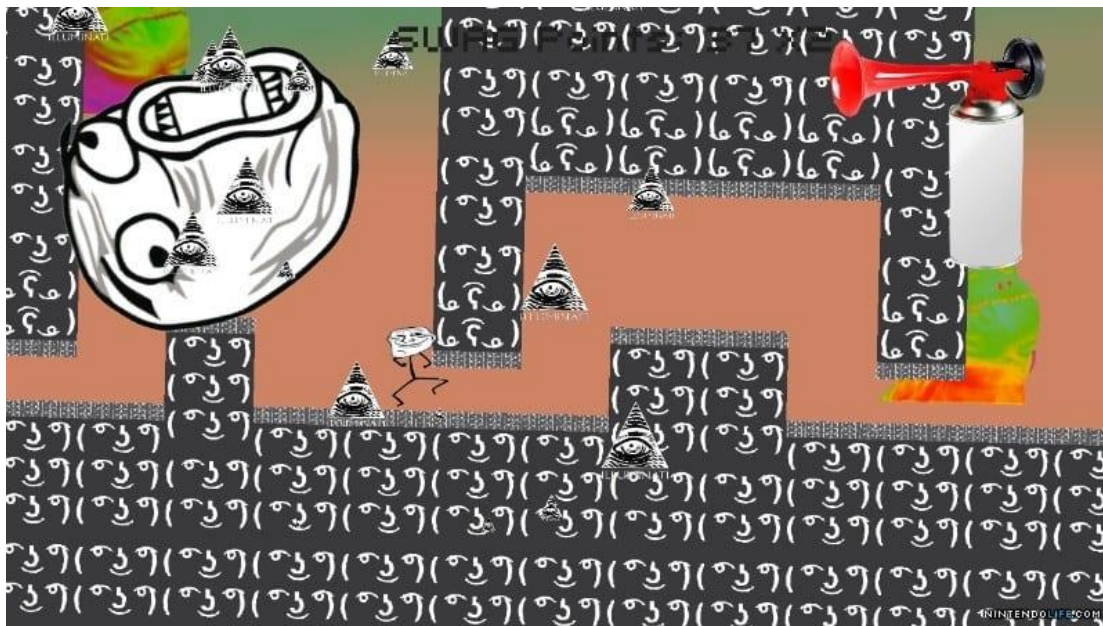
Lots of games use referential humour. It’s not bad inherently, but there are many flaws with this approach.

Take “**Borderlands**” for example. These games feature quite a bit of references and nods to other series. This has the effect of dating the game somewhat. While some references may still be relevant years later, there are quite a few that probably won’t be. In the second Borderlands game, there is a reference to “**Minecraft**”, and this reference’s humour appeal is entirely tied to how relevant “Minecraft” is.



Borderlands 2; Creeper Reference

Any game that heavily relies on memes can fall into this trap (the image below actually). “**Meme Run**” was an infinite runner that existed in 2014, and it set itself apart by aggressively using then current memes. Any comedic value the game had was lost only a few years later, simply because the reference is no longer relevant nor funny.



Meme Run; Don't use referential humour. Or at least, please try not to reference memes.

Funny Words

There will always be words that are funny, or strings of words that are funny.

Obviously words and definitions change over time, and cultural context is important.

As Jerry Seinfeld of Bee Movie fame puts it, "... Chimps? Chimps are funny" (Seinfeld, 2012).

But that word probably didn't get you to die of laughter, did it? There's no meaning or context to it. It's like a catchphrase that mean anything, it's a punchline without any setup, a non-sequitur. Of course, sometimes this works, some words just have that level of connection to them. Wouldn't you agree, GAMERS?

The game "**The Big Con**" has you swindling cash out of people through elaborate schemes (and pickpocketing). In one of the areas you find an investor who's looking for stock advice. By locating an overly-eager analyst, you get a large info dump of stock advice which you are supposed to parrot back to the investor.

This is where Flungus comes in.

What is a Flungus (Flungi)? Who knows! But it carries meaning in that it's important to the analyst and the investor, and it's YOUR job to remember it.



The Big Con; Flungus

Another great example of funny words is the game **“Turnip Boy Commits Tax Evasion”**. The words “tax evasion” are funny, but they also evoke a certain image of the game that you couldn’t get if you were to use a different set of words. The same can be said with **“Octodad: Dadliest Catch”**.

Scenarios

Some games convey their humour through premise/concept/setup alone.

Take **“Shower with Your Dad Simulator”** as an example. The gameplay is almost entirely comprised of arcade style minigames, but the selling point is the concept.

Why is this? Do people just want to shower with their dad?

No, hopefully not.

Remember Kallio and Masoodian and secondary enhancers? We’re talking about them again. They bring up the following as elements that can enhance or elevate the humour found in a game. They are as follows:

- Humorous worlds
- Environmental storytelling
- Challenging normality
- Comic relief
- Superiority humour (hey look that sounds familiar)

Many games that incorporate or feature strong comedic premises fall under at least two or three secondary comic enhancers already.

Lights, Camera, Action

One of the more common pitfalls when it comes to comedy in games is the player itself. Games are unique in that they are fundamentally interactive. In other mediums, comedy can be easily controlled by the author, where they will always know the context to any joke they deliver and plan accordingly. This isn’t always the case in games. Depending on the game, players can control the camera angle, the sequence of events, and even their actions during what are supposed to be comedic moments.

The more agency that the game gives the player, the consistency of scripted jokes and humour becomes increasingly low. A solution to this is attaching comedic potential to the systems and mechanics in the world.

A great example of this is the relatively newer type of comedy in games centered around physics. Probably the first term that comes to mind is “ragdoll”. This is a parallel to physical comedy in other mediums, where the comedy comes from superiority.

Fumblecore is a genre where players control body parts in an unwieldy fashion.

Think of games like **“QWOP”**, **“Octodad: Dadliest Catch”**, or **“Surgeon Simulator”**. These are games where the core aspect of comedy comes from the stress and release cycle of control.

Applying Comedy to Game Design

Comedy as Pacing

Comedy can be used to structure game events, pace narrative, or frame player actions.

Relief is actually a great way to relieve tension and lower stakes. Relief can be used to support the gameplay, such as the comedic non-traumatic tragedies in *The Sims* help ease the player into a sense of relief and guides them through the transitional stages of playing the game (Dormann and Biddle, 2006).



The Sims; Oops

Another example is the dialogue in *Katamari Damacy*, which incorporates this idea through its dialogue. Whenever the player begins to form a new constellation, they go through dialogue via the King of All Cosmos. Throughout the level, they are periodically greeted by the King, who will comment on their progress and the time remaining. Upon finishing the constellation, the King will talk about the new star, congratulating or berating the player for their performance. The dialogue with the King is very humorous in nature (aided by their design). This structure helps to set the pace for the game, and sets up player expectations.



Katamari Damacy; Level finished

Comedy as Engagement

Comedy can be used to engage the player and provide feedback.

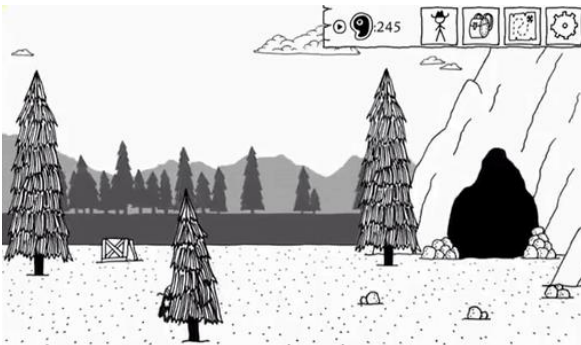
Incongruity is actually particularly useful here. By having comedy be incongruent, you can engage the players more into the design.

An example provided by Dormann and Biddle is in “GTA”. The absurdity of crashing into pedestrians and watching them ragdoll helps engage players with the game, by providing a form of feedback.



GTA; Car ragdoll

Another example of comedy as engagement is in *West of Loathing*. The game features a fairly easily accessed mode called “Stupid Walking”, which does exactly what it sounds like. This feature, along with being perfection incarnate, is actually fairly important to the game itself. There’s a lot of travelling that the player does, which could easily get dull if it weren’t for the Stupid Walking feature. By keeping players invested in a weird little walk, they are less likely to lose attention to the game world.



An example of Stupid Walking.



Another example of Stupid Walking.

Comedy as Reward

Comedy can be used to set player motivation, encourage behavior, or as a reward for playing through a game.

In the research papers, this was often referred to as “comic relief” or as “humour for fun and pleasure”.

A great example of this is in “**South Park: The Stick of Truth**”. The comedy is very crude (what did you expect from *South Park*), but the game uses comedy as a means of rewarding the player for exploration and progression. Many cutscenes, items, and other vehicles for jokes are delivered in this way.

An example of where comedy can be integrated into a currently existing reward is in “**BattleBlock Theater**”. These secret reward levels are spread around the game and give the player extra gems. However, what makes them extra special and more gratifying is the music that they use, which is a very high quality production of a rather low quality song (I think it’s great, okay), and that dissonance is hilarious. It makes finding secret levels that much more rewarding.

Finally, rewards can also come in the form of narrative. Branching narrative in games such as “**Bard Harder**” provide opportunity to go back and find jokes or scenes that you’ve missed. In addition, in the Big Con, the game revisits certain story decisions made earlier in the game, which is an additional reward for the player’s actions.

Jasper's Comedy Corner

If you’re reading the document instead of the presentation, then wow, congrats for making it this far!

There’s only so much information I can cover in a five-minute presentation, so I want to include some more anecdotal observations here. These are a little more subjective by nature, and most of the information here is derived from playing a bunch of comedy games (that both do work well and don’t).

Here’s a whole bunch of tips that I’ve observed that might provide practical help.

- Make a game that can break itself (let me explain). Most games feature systems that always follow a certain pattern or have certain rules. This kind of goes against a core part of incongruity theory. If everything follows a pattern, how are you going to surprise the player with a joke?
 - Examples: Breaking out of a dialogue menu to deliver a joke.
 - Game Examples: Frog Detective 1 + 2
- Details, details, details. Humor is most noticeable through the tiny details given. Really small stuff you wouldn’t pay attention to otherwise.
 - Examples: Stuff like characters taking note of what you said before, the game commenting on you spamming the A button to skip dialogue.
 - Game Examples: Undertale.

Conclusion

Hopefully now you’ve finished this document you are a certified expert in comedy*!

* certificate sold separately

Finally in conclusion, make funnier games. That’s really it.

As a reminder, refreshments are at the bottom of the post but please stay in the queue. Wouldn’t want folks to forget the punchline.

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- Shower With Your Dad Simulator ([Steamy](#))
- South Park: The Stick of Truth ([Steam](#))
- GTA
- Borderlands 2 ([Steam](#))
- Minecraft
- Meme Run (Wii U)
- QWOP ([Web](#))
- Surgeon Simulator ([Steam](#))
- The Haunted Island, a Frog Detective Game ([Steam](#))
- Frog Detective 2: The Case of the Invisible Wizard ([Steam](#))
- Katamari Damacy
- BattleBlock Theater ([Steam](#))
- Bard Harder

JOKES, JAPES, AND JOLLY JESTS

A LOOK AT COMEDY IN GAMES
AND HOW TO DESIGN IT

Jasper Hong

COMEDY? IN GAMES?



HOW CAN WE DESIGN GAMES
WITH COMEDY IN MIND?

So what's funny then?

The
Wiggles



Relief



(Morreall, 1983)

Relief



Superiority



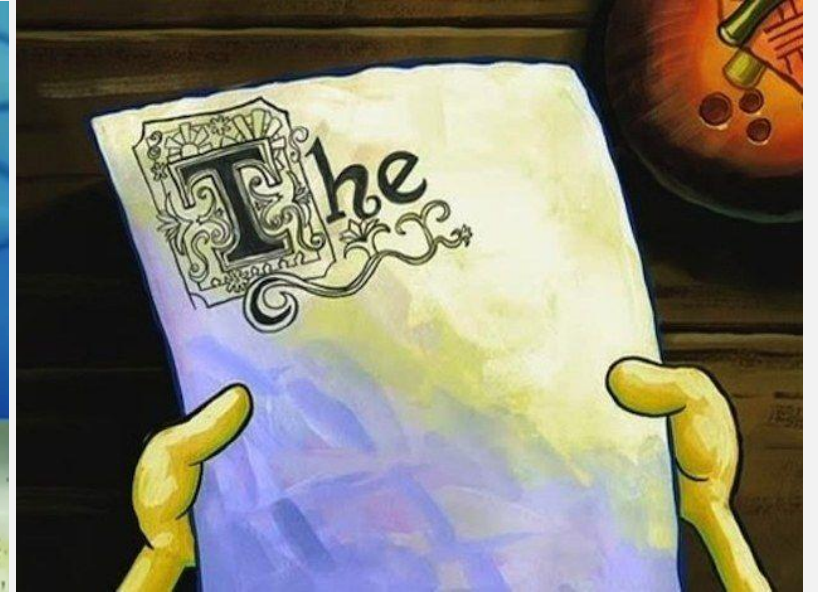
Relief



Superiority



Incongruity

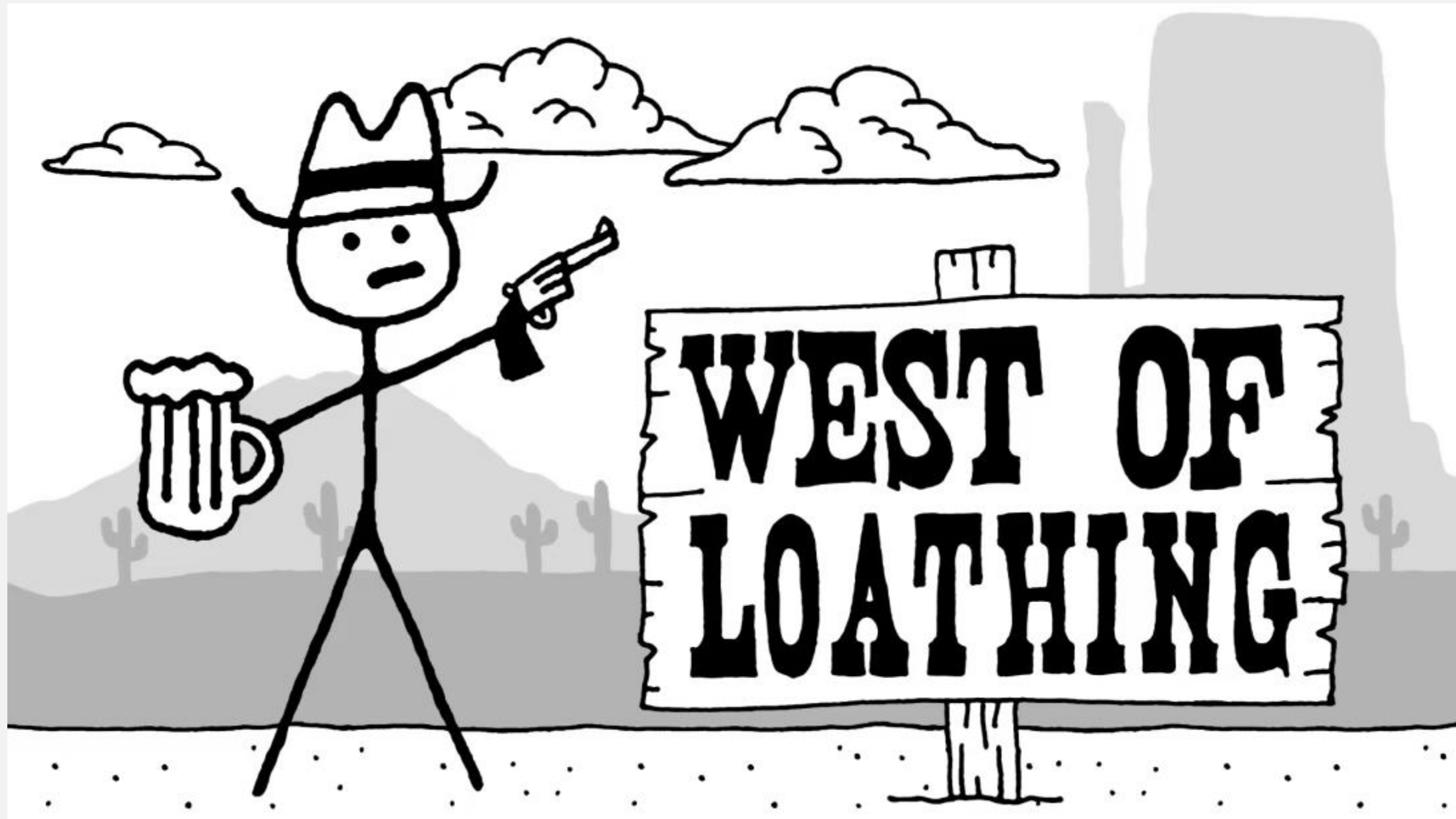




EXAMINING COMEDY IN GAMES

“DYING IS EASY, COMEDY IS HARD.”

- Edmund Gwenn



You reach your hand toward the spittoon. Even before you touch it, you can *feel* the grossness in the air -- like a greasy fog enveloping the stinking brass horror. It smells like the vomit trough at a mesquite BBQ eating contest.

You hesitate.

You plunge your hand into the awful soup. It makes a sound like "glop." Your skin is burning. Your eyes start to water.

Your fingers make contact with something. You pull your hand out of the devil's tureen slowly, not daring to risk splashing the contents all over yourself.

You appear to have gotten some kind of ring. Probably some kind of disease, as well. Congratulations?



You got an item: **nasty ring**

[1] Hooray?



Detective

I will suspect myself much more from now on!





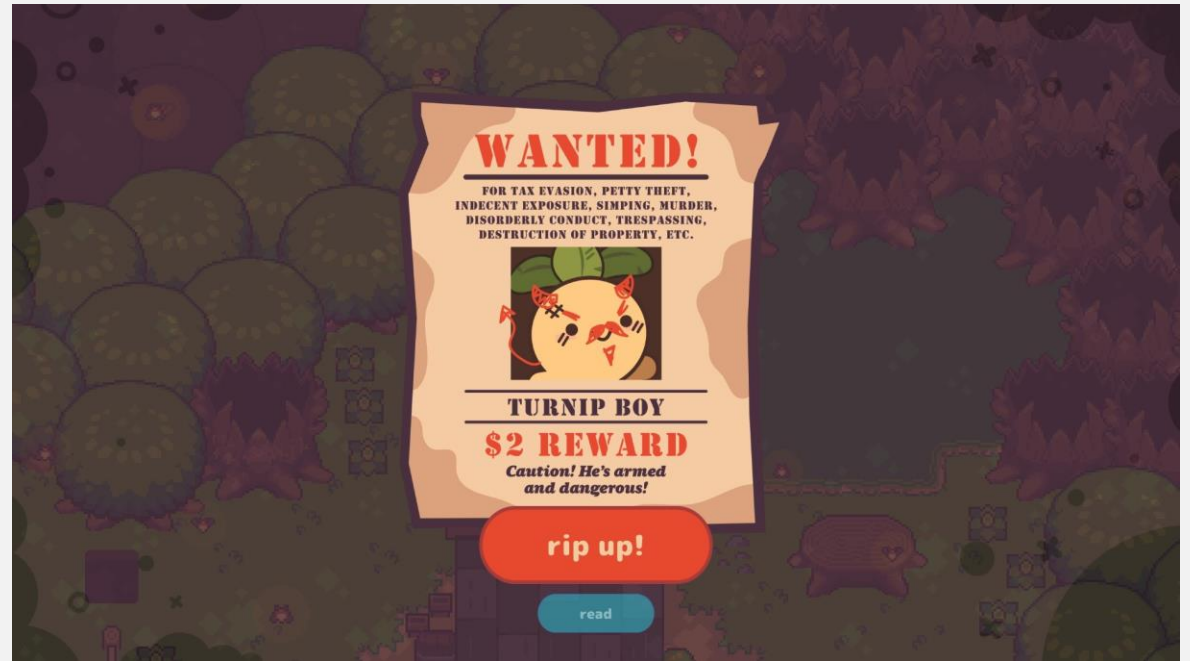








(Seinfeld, 2012) yes he actually said this.










SHOWER WITH YOUR DAD SIMULATOR 2015

DO YOU STILL SHOWER WITH YOUR DAD?





So to make real ROI moves on import and export from major securities you can't just use the Flungus Index you also have to have a good Output / Import Sorting Predictor also.

A



Best: 1m

QWOP

© Foddy.net 2008



THIGHS

-1.1 metres

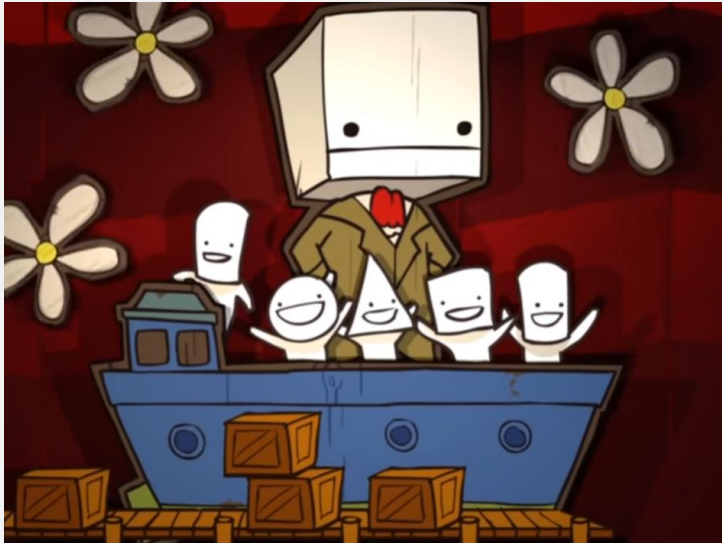


CALVES



Comedy as Pacing

Using humour to structure game events, pace narrative, or frame player actions.



(Dormann and Biddle, 2006) (Kallio and Masoodian, 2019)

Comedy as Engagement

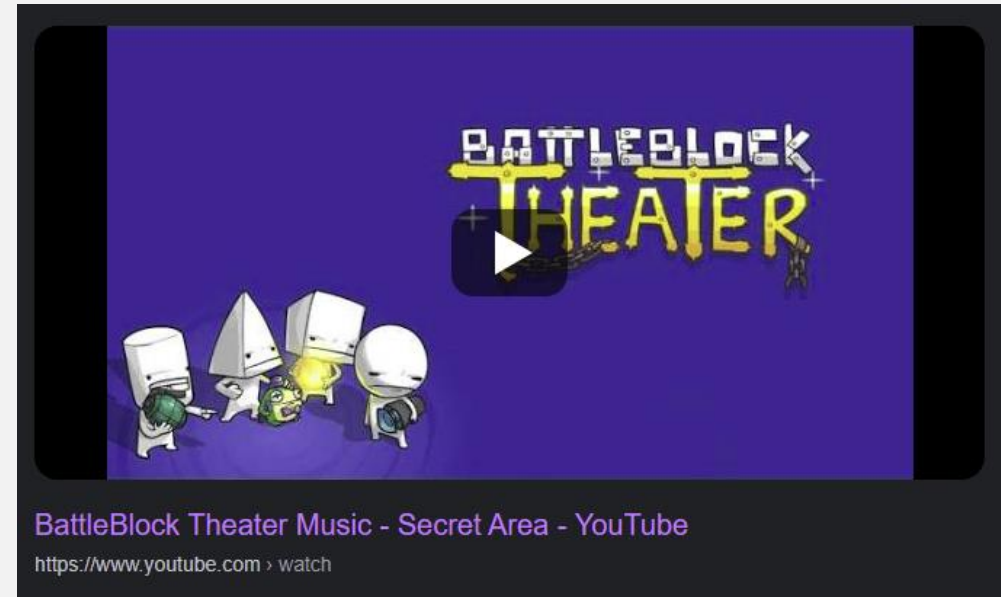
Using humour to engage the player and provide feedback.



(Dormann and Biddle, 2006) (Kallio and Masoodian, 2019)

Comedy as Reward

Using humour to set player motivation, encourage behaviour, or just as a funny little reward.



(Dormann and Biddle, 2006) (Kallio and Masoodian, 2019)

THANKS FOR LISTENING!

Now you know the deal with airplane food.



Script

Hello, welcome to my presentation on comedy in games!

So if you're anything like me, you like a good laugh, a chuckle, or even just exhaling air through your nose a little harder than normal.

Too bad there's really not much there, at least in comparison to other artistic mediums.

So that's why today I'll be asking the question, how can we design games with comedy in mind?

Well, in order to figure out how to make a funny game, first we have to figure out what's funny. In all of history, the only truly funny thing to exist...

is The Wiggles. But we have some theories about comedy.

First, there's relief theory, which says that humour comes from a release of stress/as a source of pleasure.

Second, there's superiority theory, which says that humour comes from feeling triumphant or superior to others, enjoying misfortune and all that.

Third, there's incongruity theory, which says that humour comes from the unexpected or surprising. And yes, we know that comedy is subjective...

But The Wiggles isn't, so moving on.

We're going to be going over some examples of comedy in games to try finding patterns of what works well and what works maybe not so well. Although writing is the "easiest" one to implement, it is the one of the easiest to mess up.

Or as the actor once supposedly said on his deathbed, "Dying is easy, comedy is hard". This shows often when games try to be funny when it clashes with its other elements. Written comedy works best when it's complemented by other elements of the game.

Take West of Loathing for example. The game's artstyle is in plain stick figures, which brings attention to the strength of the writing.

The writing is very witty and dry, and it's obvious the game was built with the comedy in mind.

Frog Detective is another game that has very good comedic writing that, like West of Loathing, is supported by the game's aesthetic and tone.

The situation and jokes are almost farcical.

Often the most common type of comedy in games that doesn't hold up well over-time is referential humour. Maybe a reference in Borderlands might stay relevant,

but could you say the same about Meme Run?

For a more recent example of references making or breaking a joke, see

The Wiggles vs Yo Gabba Gabba.

Incongruent words or concepts are also fairly common in comedy games. Some words inherently are funny. According to

Bee Movie legend Jerry Seinfeld, “Chimps? Chimps are funny.” But there is more that can be done to utilize this incongruity.

For example, Turnip Boy Commits Tax Evasion is a funny title, but it also evokes an image.

Speaking of evoking an image, there are some comedy elements that can enhance comedy, such as humorous worlds or challenging normality. Some games can hook players with the implied comedy of premise alone, such as

Katamari Damacy,

Octodad Dadliest Catch, and of course,

Shower with your Dad Simulator.

Another example of funny words is in The Big Con, which has a scene where you parrot stock advice that an analyst gives you to an investor. They info dump a bunch of meaningless words, but word choice of Flungus makes the scene work so well.

Physics are a great source of incongruity and potentially superiority, as evident by a lot of fumblecore games like QWOP. Most mechanics-based humour does well at getting around the problem of setting up a joke in an interactive medium.

So let’s get back to our question. How can we design games with comedy in mind? First, we can use comedy as a method of pacing. The comedy of Sims dying helps to pace the game and eases the player. Katamari games are paced by the comedy of the King of All Cosmos dialogue, as the presence and progression of jokes helps guides the player through its narrative.

Second, comedy can help engage players. Frog Detective has a magnifying glass that does nothing functionally but sells the fantasy. In GTA running people over and watching them ragdoll can be a source of player engagement. West of Loathing features Stupid Walking, which keeps the player invested even when they’re just walking around.

Third, comedy can be a reward itself. Player motivation could be tied to comedy. Turnip Boy has the player be rewarded with achievements and the satisfaction of ripping up documents, which gives incentive for the players to keep playing. Other examples of this are the cutscenes and interactions in South Park or the different dialogue branches in Bard Harder.

That’s all for me, and if you learn anything today...

Yo Gabba Gabba is truly peak comedy.