

Designing Comedy for Narrative Games

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GAME34178: Special Topics in Applied Game Design

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Abstract

This report will focus on how story-based games can create comedic mechanics, and how these mechanics can define comedy as a real and important genre in the video game industry. By going over the psychology of how comedy works, understanding how players can create comedy, and considering important design factors, games can differentiate themselves from film and television to create comedy through mechanics and design, rather than just creating a humorous story.

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Thinking of the most popular video games today, people would instantly think of action adventures, survival horrors and first-person shooters. Unfortunately, comedy is not a popular genre in games. While comedy is earning the big bucks as the #1 genre in Hollywood and television (Most Popular Movie Genres), it's not doing the same justice in interactive mediums. Sure, sometimes players can have hilarious experiences in a variety of games due to bugs, mods, Easter eggs, simulation freedom, and abnormal physics, but sometimes these games are not acknowledged under the comedy genre. On the other hand, there have been many narrative and story-based games that have experimented with this underexplored genre in the last few years, such as *The Stanley Parable*, *Undertale*, and the *Borderlands* franchise. Even though developers are now recently interested in comedy, it does not necessarily mean that they figured out the best way to incorporate comedy into games. Games are vastly different mediums compared to recorded and theatrical performances. A film with a funny story is considered a comedy film. But a game having a funny story should not mean the game is considered a comedy game. If so, that's similar to saying a game with a scary story puts it in the horror genre. Game genres, unlike film and television, are defined by its design and the player's experience, not necessarily the story. The game must rely on its mechanics to allow the player to have an *engaging experience*. So this begs the question, how should narrative games design comedy mechanics to establish it as a genre? In order to figure out this out, let's first define and understand what comedy *is*.

The Psychology of What is Humor

Comedy can be easily defined as “something that is funny and makes us laugh”. But what makes us laugh? By diving into the psychology of how comedy works, it can give us a better understanding of how to eventually create comedy. Peter McGraw is a behavioral scientist and psychology professor who specializes in the magic of comedy. He and Caleb Warren defines humor as “a psychological response characterized by the positive emotion of amusement, the appraisal that something is funny, and the tendency to laugh” (McGraw and Warren). McGraw developed the Benign Violation Theory which insists that we find things funny when the situation is both benign -- meaning gentle or kind, and a violation -- meaning failure to respect a norm, at the same time. Which is why “playing fighting and tickling, which produce laughter in humans (and other primates), are benign violations because they are physically threatening but harmless attack” (McGraw). Jokes must be non-threatening or else they will be too much of a violation, and same thing goes for benign; these two elements should be balanced out equally. Games are the perfect medium to express benign violation because there are established norms that can be broken. For example, in *Tales from the Borderlands*, the player, as Rhys, knows that when they knock out an enemy, they’ll either be successful or fail at that quick time event. But the player would not expect to fail regardless because the enemy starts questioning the player’s humiliating attempt as Rhys is still pathetically trying to strangle him. It has the violation of trying to hurt someone, and it’s benign since the bandit getting attacked thinks it’s his friend Eric joking around. There are many violations already implemented in games, so allowing creativity to step in with a good balancing benign to compliment them can make some very hilarious original content.

An earlier theory was presented in the 20th century by Thomas Hobbes and René Descartes called Superiority Theory, which suggests that being funny lets people feel superior towards others or their former selves. (Morreall). Even though this theory isn't very relevant in modern times, it still has a strong supporting connection to game design. Games that want the player to feel heroic and challenged must feel *empowering*. They must feel in control and believe they have the power to manipulate what happens in the game world. Allowing the *player to produce comedy* can allow them to feel superior, confident and influential. This strongly suggests a crucial feature needed in a 'comedy game', which is to *allow the player to be the comedian*. "Players can be funny" says Zoë Quinn, the developer of *Depression Quest*. "There are so many people that just love messing with stuff, [...] players like to do that, so definitely encourage that" (Comedy Games). Especially in non-linear narrative games, the player is able to alter the course of the story. Letting the player's comedy develop and guide the story can embellish the experience significantly.

Improvisation is Interactivity

When comedians train to be funny, or someone wants to add a fun approach to their lifestyle, they can take improv. Improv is a form of comedy where the performer must think, say and do whatever pops up in their head at the moment. The nation's most famous improv theatres include The Second City, where they have trained many talented and famous comedians who are dominating the comedy scene today. The most important rule their improvisers live by is "Yes, and...", meaning to never say no, always agree and continue forward as "all ideas are accepted and built on" (McKnight 13). This is kept in mind when performing on stage: don't try to change the theme, don't shut down a fellow performer's joke, and don't stop the scene. This rule can be

considered in game design. Games that allow players to produce their own comedy should never say no to them. Restrictions or no reactions from the game world will discourage their jokes and dishearten the players. Playtesting would come in handy to figure out what players do when trying to be funny, and then implement reactions at the corresponding times. Keeping on the same subject, improv is a great thing to keep in mind when designing games. When people are playing games, they are already improvising; they try things out to gain an understanding, go exploring and discover new things. These actions the player does when improvising is *interacting* within the game. So keep in mind that in games, *improvising is a form of interactivity*. Improv may seem like a gigantic factor to implement into games because it means to provide a lot of freedom to players. Tom Yorton, CEO of The Second City Communications says that improvisers are “listening because those are vital cues and vital information that’s going to allow you to create something great” (Carpenter). The improvisers, in this case the players, are always listening and finding clues to understand what to do next. Designers should understand the player’s state of mind and their thought process as they are improvising, so conducting playtesting with a thinking-out-loud approach is crucial. Games should encourage creativity when thinking, so if a player thinks outside the box, their actions should not go unnoticed. For example, in *The Stanley Parable*, the player can be locked in a room with a telephone ringing. They can choose to answer it or ignore it, but the player could notice that the phone is connected to the wall and decide to unplug it. The fact that the game allows for the player to perform that action and even have the narrator react to it is the magic of improvising and producing comedy. If games allow the player to think “Wouldn’t it be funny if...”, then let that thought happen (Comedy Games). A game that encourages and promotes improvisation will allow the player to feel in control and empowered.

The Audience's Job is to React to Jokes

McGraw says that his “theory indicates you should pay attention to your audience, and it suggests everyone has a good sense of humor under the right circumstances“(What Makes Things Funny). In the case of film, television and performance, the audience will be the viewers watching in a theatre or bundled up on their couch at home. Games could also easily allow the player to be the audience too and let them watch their game, but that’s not what games should be doing. Everyone goes to a film, watches a show, and plays a game for the experience, but games offers what film and television can’t do, the *interactive experience*. Is the player considered the audience? The player is in control of the game and they are the comedian, so the *game itself should be considered the audience*. Games allow their worlds to react to the actions of a player; the player attacks an enemy, the enemy gets hit. The player attacks for the final time, the enemy dies. With McGraw’s tickling theory he even states “you can’t tickle yourself” because you can’t violate yourself (“TEDxBoulder - Peter McGraw - What Makes Things Funny”). The player will not find what they do funny until there is a reaction. It’s almost like telling jokes to a wall. You can’t make yourself laugh because you are already predicting what you're about to do. But, you can laugh at the game’s reaction of your action. In Toby Fox’s game *Undertale*, most of its witty comedy comes from the characters reacting to what the player does. Many of the enemies have uniquely different ways to ‘act’ around them, rather than fighting. For instance, when encountering Lesser Dog, the player could fight him or choose from five actions that are all labelled ‘pet’. The player may notice that Lesser Dog’s neck will grow an inch as he over-excitedly accepts being petted. So, the player can use this as a chance to perform an over-exaggerated joke, and the game purposely supports it. The game allows the player to press this option countless of times, and Lesser Dog’s neck will continue to grow upwards to the top of the

screen, then head off-screen, then surprisingly make a comeback by growing downwards towards the bottom of the screen. If a game reacts to the player's intentions and produced comedy, the player will be extremely amused. That itself, even acts as a reward for the player, so the comedy the player's produce should be worth it.

Why Comedy Should Be Considered an Important Game Genre

Comedy is a genre that works extremely well with games. At times people play games to be entertained, while others it's a pastime when dealing with stress. Just like first-person shooters, comedy is a great way to relieve and forget about pain. McGraw states that "humor is beneficial. It makes you happy, and it helps you cope with pain, stress and adversity" ("TEDxBoulder - Peter McGraw - What Makes Things Funny"). In order to be funny, "you need to be clever". Gil Greengross, an anthropologist at University of Mexico, "thinks the secret to being funny is being smart". He even states that "humor itself is an intelligence indicator. [...] Smart people are better-read and they know more about the world. They can connect these dots" (Khazan). Being funny can be the similar reason as to why people play puzzle games: Players want to be challenged, but also feel smart, especially when getting rewarded. Through good game design, it can let the players think and believe they are producing comedy. Giving intellect empowerment is a great mild touch to comedic game design. In the end, throughout understanding how comedy can be achieved in games, it proves that it has the potential to becoming a great genre for the gaming industry.

Although this genre is underexplored, comedy deserves to be further experimented to find what makes comedic games unique and special. There are so many interesting finds when

analyzing comedy roots and psychology. Games that wish to be a comedy should allow the player to be the comedian, encourage and inspire improvisation, consider the game as the audience, and give the player's the chance to feel intelligent. These freshly discovered aspects can be used as a formula for creating comedic interactivity. After diving deep into investigation, this revelation on humor implementation can be the boost needed to familiarize and popularize comedy games. This genre may soon be just as big, or bigger, than action games, thus coinciding with the film and television industry.

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