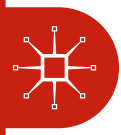

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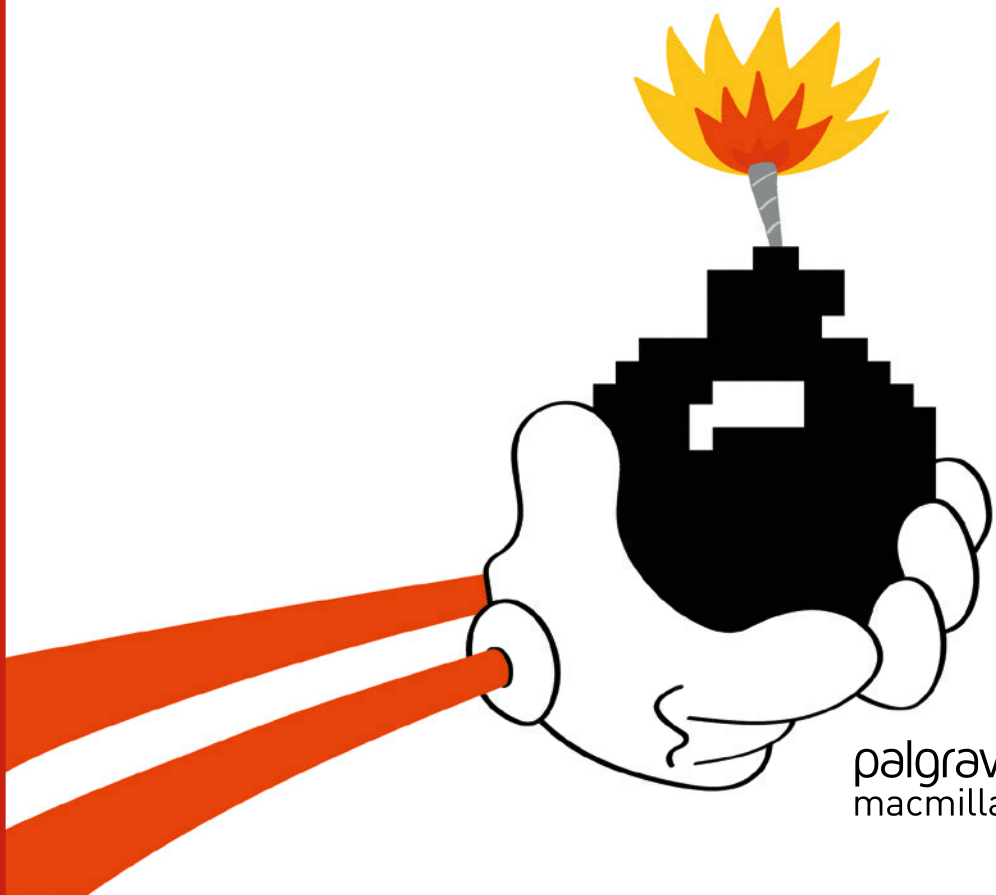

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Contents

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List of Figures

On Nintendo's Visual Humour: Slapstick Cinema and Comic Theatre in *Super Smash Bros*

The *Illuminatus* Space Game: From an April Fools' Joke to Digital Cultural Heritage

***Red Comrades Save the Galaxy*: Early Russian Adventure Games and the Tradition of Anecdote**

"Sorry, You *Had* Won": Satirical French Digital Games Responding to National Sociopolitical Crisis (1984–1986)

Making Fun of *Tetris*: Humour in Parodies of a Computer Game Classic

Ridiculing the Player: Live-Action Visualisations of Game Experience in YouTube Parody Videos as an Ambivalent Strategy of Self-Fashioning

"Mark Matthews Stars in 'Anatomy is Hard!' A Struggling Student Tries to Make the Grade with His Professor": Sexual Humour and Queer Space in *Coming Out on Top*

Humour in Pornographic Browser Games: From *Undertale* to *Uddertale*, a Case Study

That Joke Isn't Funny Anymore (Or Is It?): On *Hitman* and Gamer Humour(lessness)

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

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

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

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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 addresses 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 found in 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, 49).

Johan Huizinga, while distinguishing play from comedy in terms of the latter's thematic make-up as a genre (1971, 6), roots the dramatic frame itself (whether tragic or comic) in play (144). However, he seems to uphold play's close association with 'humour' (129, 205–207). "Timelessness" as "a capacity of comedy", infused with a carnival spirit (Garber 2004, 325), appears in his view to draw its life from that "festive" rhythm of "timeless, ever-recurring patterns of play" (Huizinga 1971, 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, 198–199). Earnest play can, however, be considered comical by outside observers. After all, games require a 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, 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 that launches 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:

> [F]or 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, 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 for having effects that were deemed indecorous, such as laughter (Neale and Krutnik 1990, 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 (e.g. one can usually reload). 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, 83; our translation)

Sophie Quirk (2015, 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 seem to legitimise conservative viewpoints (Bonello Rutter Giappone, Francis, MacKenzie 2018), while buttressing itself against critique by invoking the questionable 'just a joke' defence (see Quirk 2015, 74–77; Billig 2005a, 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, 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 licences 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 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, 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, 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 defences against critique, "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, 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],

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, 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 2014). 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, 162); or a gap becomes apparent between a concept and the "real objects" that supposedly correspond to it (Schopenhauer 1969, 59); or a surprising similarity is revealed. 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 V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios 2011–; see also Dormann 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 for universally understood, traditional humour (see Peacock 2017).

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 and 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 towards 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 pre-emptively 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, 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, b), 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 overabundance 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 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, 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 a commonplace scene in open-world adventure games, from *Assassin's Creed Brotherhood* (Ubisoft 2010) to *Horizon Zero Dawn*, 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 forms of grotesque unions of a human and a non-human in the 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 licence for delivering so-called 'innocent' delight, and its use to justify problematic content, is this game company's defence 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, 70; emphasis added)

The 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 overoptimistic 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 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, 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, 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 2005a, b for comedy, Trammell 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, 1984b).

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 towards 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 or playing with another text by highlighting its easily recognisable qualities, usually in comic or ironic 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 repetition with difference also serves to introduce new qualities (Nycz 2000). Even if seen as a