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# 30. VERTIGO AND VERTICALITY IN SUPER MONKEY BALL

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Troels Degn Johansson

## ABSTRACT

The vertical dimension is crucial to Super Monkey Ball on all levels<sup>1</sup>, and invites us to meditate on vertigo and verticality, falling and failing in the construction of space and game-play in this game and in computer-games as such. In Super Monkey Ball, the vertical dimension should be mastered (landing on tiny islands with the ball glider), avoided (off golf courses, off race tracks, or off fight arenas elevated almost astronomically above the ground), although it may also invite to dangerous downslide acceleration or short-cuts that will give your baby monkey ball a lead in the race (descending tilting planes, falling from one level to another while staying on the course). But most notably, verticality is emphasized by falling and failing. Slipping off the race-track or shooting oneself off the golf course by mistake always means dropping into a spectacular free fall; losing the poor baby monkey in dark swamps, sparkling oceans, or void, endless desert-like spaces. Meditating on this aesthetization of falling and failing in Super Monkey Ball, this brief study outlines the peculiar allegorical, albeit funny and social character of this game, which seems just as important as the playing of the game as such.

## KEYWORDS

Aesthetics of computer games, fun, console gaming, rhetoric, allegory, Super Monkey Ball

## INTRODUCTION

As a computer game, Super Monkey Ball (SMB) is a bagatelle. If we are to believe Klastrop's informal observation elsewhere in this collective presentation, players of SMB enjoy playing this game although they do not normally play computer games. SMB's appeal to otherwise non-gamers (as well as gamers) seems to be based on the fact that this game is not to be taken seriously in the same way that computer games usually are since its social aspect is just as important as—and in a certain sense dominates—the playing of the game itself. Although SMB does function well as a game and probably could be taken very seriously, the console setting, its cute monkey imagery, caricatures of infantile egos and ego-centric player behavior, and the thematization of motor insufficiency and perceptual disorder invite to a lighter way of

<sup>1</sup>That is in all "games", as the Nintendo GameCube terminology has it.

playing that seems particularly appealing to those who find hard-core gaming "uncivilized" (and probably also to those who could indeed take the game seriously but wish to demonstrate that they, too, can take in the charm of baby monkeys and less aggressive, less goal oriented player behavior).

This short paper argues that SMB—because of its lightness and caricature-based suspension of the hard-core game player approach—lends itself more easily to a rhetorical reading; a reading that foregrounds the distinct vertical theme of the game in order to "monkey" the player him/herself, that is the ego and its "erroneous self-sufficiency." As Nintendo has it on their SMB web-pages: "Go ahead, make a monkey of yourself"<sup>2</sup> Following this we finally compare SMB with some of the rhetorical strategies that we have also seen employed in short computer games for the World Wide Web; strategies which we elsewhere, in semiotic terms, have laid out as being either satirical or allegorical. [1]

#### **MONKEY PLAY: MULTI-PLAY IN THE CONSOLE SETTING**

According to the recent computer-games criticism, multi-play in networked environments has brought back to computer-games the truly social element of which games supposedly originate. However, the multi-play facilitated by the common console setting is obviously a much more clear-cut case of this, since the players here share not only the same virtual environment of a game world but indeed the same physi-

cal environment of a living room or wherever one chooses to play such games. The console setting brings players together in a casual atmosphere, typically in one (or more) of the players' home in which two to four players share the limited space given by the length of the chords from the four game controls to the console and the kaleidoscopic spectacle of a split television screen, which does not allow the players much distance to each other if those are to follow the action. Console settings are relatively stationary since the console kit is linked up with a television set. The console setting typically bases itself on a social network that has been established independently of the game; couples or groups that just turn on the console in order to have fun and to be entertained.

This social, domestic setting forms out a context that the game will have to relate to in order to be a good game. Most importantly, console games develop the domestic television setting into a situation where each of the players can see his or her own position and relative success in the game in relation to the other players and how they are doing. All facts about the game action are thus simultaneously shared with all players, which make it possible for all players to observe and comment on everything that is going on. This is so since all action takes place on the common television screen and in relatively small game-world in which it is easy to identify the other players' virtual location in relation to one's own; that may be in turn-based full-screen game action as well as in split-screen synchronous games.

<sup>2</sup> Observed on <http://www.nintendo.com> at August 25th 2003.

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SMB is thus clearly designed in such a way that it is easy to follow the action and fate of other players' playing so that one may comment on it while playing the game oneself. The initial choice of a baby monkey avatar is not the free construction of a complex virtual identity for a long "life" of action and character development (like in MMORPGs) but a figure from a fixed group of four baby monkeys for instant action and fun; a group that is thus a constant of the game, each of them having a fixed name and a fixed character. The monkeys are encapsulated in balls of simple bright colors (red, green, blue, yellow) and have individual bodily features that make them relatively easy to separate from each other. This allows players to brag off, tease, gloat over and *monkey* other players while striving for the best performance. Yet, what is fun in SMB is not only winning but also, and perhaps more importantly, watching other player monkeys fail; watch them celebrate a victory, be angry or cry because of a defeat. Trying to develop player competence and master the situation in order to win the game is important—this is a game! —But this is obviously not the only, or most important goal of this game.

As a social game or "party game", the player gathers with other in order to have fun together; not simply of finding a winner but more importantly of amusing oneself with fellow players; trying to win but also of preventing others from winning, e.g. by pushing opponents of the arena (Monkey Fight) or trying to make them slip off the course by dropping a banana skin (*Monkey Race*). What is at play is a kind of col-

lective game-play where the game-play value for the individual player is tied up with the other players performance and the comments and laughter that this comparison gives rise to. Such "monkeying" of others players is supported by the overtly infantile behavior of the monkeys, but obviously in a light, caricatured fashion which in a sense monkey the "raw" competition of the common computer game and the natural ego-centrism it gives rise to. Klastrop's empirical study elsewhere in this presentation clearly supports this interpretation. The point is exactly that SMB makes it "socially safe" to verbalize and brag over your victory and gloat over the other players' defeat, but paradoxically this only distance the players from serious playing. Not unlike rhetorical games, SMB thus suspends the seriousness of playing while still maintaining the basic structure and goals of the ordinary computer game.

The choice of figures for this game; the cute, yet childishly self-indulgent baby monkeys encapsulated in small balls, forms out a kind of super-theme of the game that matches perfectly the special collective game-play and the typical situation of multi-play for co-present players. Tosca also develops this point. Being a baby once again, one is to develop basic motor competence in respect of moving, maneuvering, and especially of not falling down from something, that is, off the course that one is trying to master. However, the conditions of the console setting do not leave the players with the best possibilities of mastering the situation, and this obviously

emphasizes the theme. The split screen image is relatively small, and the extreme wide-angle image inhibits one's normal motor skills and makes mastering the movements rather difficult.<sup>3</sup> As a test player in our empirical study exclaimed, "This is like riding a bicycle when you're drunk!" Add to this the fact that your little monkey is trapped in a ball and left to move only by trying to make the ball roll. In the fixed third-person perspective of SMB, rolling one's monkey around in the world feels more like tilting the planes of a world that passes by the ball rather than actually navigating the ball through a world; an effect which is not unlike a particular kid's toy where you should get a steel ball through a wooden labyrinth filled with holes by tilting the labyrinth's plane on two separate axes with your right and left hand respectively (Fig. 1).<sup>4</sup>



Image 1: The Labyrinth Original by Swedish toy manufacturer Brio.

### MISE EN ABYME

The resemblance with the tilting labyrinth is even stronger if one focuses on the distinct vertical theme in SMB. As mentioned, the games or levels of SMB usually takes place on courses or tracks that are elevated astronomically from a distant ground, and when playing SMB, one is constantly at risk of falling into an abyss with one's baby monkey. This vertical dimension is emphasized by the use of dramatically descending planes in certain games and by giant lianas, rock pillars, and spiral castle-like constructions that disappears far below and far above. And when one falls of the track with one's monkey ball, the ball disappears into an abysmal environment of clouds, darkness, or nothingness; as if one is virtually falling many kilometers without ever hitting the ground before re-spawning at the track on the location where one fell of.

The elevation is a re-occurring theme throughout the games. In the main game with tilting planes, temporarily disconnected tracks, and other kinds of spatial problem solving, the monkeys are taken from one plane in the sky to another further above after having completed the first. By identifying the spatial form of the course as it appears through the clouds, one gets an idea of the problem that one is to solve next. In *Monkey Bowling*, like in ordinary bowling, the bowling alley has a ditch on each side that will catch the ball if one cannot through it directly towards the poles; except that in *Monkey Bowling*, the ditch is not a ditch but an urban abyss, so if you cannot control the direction, the poor monkey ball will disappear somewhere

<sup>3</sup> Not least that is, if you – like me – are used to keyboard controls

<sup>4</sup> The Swedish toy manufacturer BRIO produces such a piece of toy named Labyrinth Original.

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far below in a nocturnal cityscape. In *Monkey Target* one is to hit small islands in the ocean with a kind of ball para-glider without colliding with bombs in the air and without missing the targets and drowning in the sea. And in *Monkey Fight*, like in sumo wrestling, one has to punch other monkey players off the arena and avoid being punched off oneself. If you don't, your monkey is not just off the combat field, but also lost in kilometers of free fall before re-spawning in a weaker version. In *Monkey Golf*, one's monkey ball is a mini-golf ball that is to find its hole without dropping off the course—which does not mean ending up in the bunker or in a lake but losing one's monkey in yet other kilometers of free fall.

The extreme elevation of SMB's courses, arenas, combat zones, etc., reminds us of the grand roller coasters of the amusement parks (or of a caricature of a roller coaster); a setting which of course is also about having fun by subjecting yourself—and watching your friends—subject themselves to extreme movements, perceptual distortion, and hence the suspension of your common physical capabilities. Yet, this monkey world is just much, much wilder. The vertical imagery of SMB is not unlike that of the visual identity of the Copenhagen Tivoli; the old amusement park, which in posters and other pictorial depictions often is attributed an imagined verticality—to be elevated from the ground to a degree which is supposed to resemble that of the roller coaster or Ferris wheel point-of-view but which in fact is much more extreme; an elevation that transcends not only the treetops of the park but also the cityscape below (Fig. 2). This imagined verticality contrasts the rather limited geographical extension of the Tivoli garden, its ordinary garden-like appearance, and the ordinary Copenhagen life, and opens up for a poetic dimension of romanticism and orientalism which is also characteristic of the garden's archi-

tecture. This conjunction of extreme verticality, romanticism, and orientalism is explored further in François Schuiten and Benoît Peeters' comics album *The Road to Armilia* (La Route à l'Armilia, Casterman, 1988) from the comics series *The Obscure Cities* (Les Cités obscures).



Image 2-3: Comics illustration by François Schuiten and Benoît Peeters: *The Road to Armilia*; a vertically distorted depiction of the cityscape of Copenhagen with its old towers and the Odin Express roller coaster around the fireworks of Tivoli.

The vertical theme of SMB is emphasized by the visual design, even when one is staying right on course as one is supposed to. In the *Monkey Race*, the monkey balls roll rapidly through ditch-like courses, and when the ball is rolling for real, the extreme wide-angle/fish eye perspective and the visual patterns of the course makes the player feel like the ball is actually rolling downwards as if down a slope. In this perspective, the player's ability to estimate distances become distorted— it is as if the world just keeps coming toward you with a tremendous pace. This optical impression is emphasized further by the sparkles that radiates in all directions from a fixed center behind the ball when it rolls through a course; an expression that creates an



almost abysmal perspective.

Image 4: Screen shot from the typical concave Monkey Race track with a visual pattern that emphasizes speed and with sparkles radiating from the center.

As a computer game, SMB is what scholars of literature would call a *mise en abyme*; the “staging of an abyss” (i.e. André Gide’s pun on the French expressions *mise en scène*, staging; and the word *abyme*, abyss). According to comparative literature, the use of the literary trope of the *mise en abyme* has, in experimental fiction, tended towards the Symbolist tradition, where the limits of language are tested in an extreme self-reflexivity closed off from the reference function of language. In the study of narrative and visual representation in general, the concept has thus come to capture the instability or fragility of representation, for example by thematizing the perishable or transitory character of the material of expression (e.g. the paper of a book), an erratic structure of enunciation (e.g. an insane narrator), or that the epic depiction of a human being eventually turns out to be staged as if a game (e.g. Peter Weirs film “The Truman Show, USA, 1998).

Bearing in mind the fundamental ontological differences between games and the literary expression in literature, cinema, etc., addressed by Juul and others [2] I would still argue that the concept of *mise en abyme* is pertinent when we are to capture the themes of vertigo and verticality in SMB. This is so, not only because of the verticality thus depicted in

the SMB games but also, and perhaps more importantly because of the paradoxical character of SMB as a game: That we have to laugh and distance ourselves from the monkeys that take the game so deadly serious, although at the same time we get an excuse to simulate seriousness and brag off, tease, and gloat over fellow players in a more uncivilized, infantile fashion. In this sense, I would say that the paradoxical character of SMB “monkeys” the ordinary computer games that it almost perfectly resemble; a strategy that is similar to the *mise en abyme* in the literary expression although computer games are not capable of expressing anything in the same way as e.g. literature and cinema.

#### THE SPIRAL EAR

The abysmal character of SMB leads us to approach a second, even “deeper” paradox of the game; namely that despite its lightness, the charm of its cute little monkeys, and the suspension of “uncivilized hardcore gaming”, this game is still able to—if not “express”, then at least “point at”—a poetic dimension that is somewhat “darker” and subtly melancholic than the apparently superficial monkey imagery otherwise indicates. For whereas the friendly “monkeying” of one’s (lack of) skills when facing the challenging courses and tracks of SMB is funny, it cannot help addressing the player ego’s basic insufficiency; that “no matter how effective you may be as a player of this actually very difficult game you have been struggling with for such a long time, this is all in vain for real life is so different and much harder.” Falling and failing—which is emphasized excessively in this game—thus points poetically at a kind of recognition of one’s fundamental insufficiency; that “I am in fact just a little monkey lost somewhere between heaven and earth.” I am touching here upon what we have previously referred to as a super-theme in computer games, namely the basic association between Game and Life. In a previous work, along with Madsen, I

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have demonstrated how rhetorical strategies in short computer games for the World Wide Web base themselves on a cognitive mapping similar to that of metaphors. Following Lakoff and Johnson, this association is based on a conceptual mapping of games (source domain) upon Life (target domain), [3] which again associates the urge for game mastery with the urge for eternal life.

SMB resembles the rhetorical strategies of short computer games for the World Wide Web. Exactly by exceeding or transgressing itself as a game, it becomes possible for SMB to express profound ideas about Game and Life—or rather, for the player to realize these ideas. Emphasizing vertigo and verticality, falling and failing, SMB twists poetically and playfully this monstrous association into a slightly melancholic pathos: Just as it is impossible to achieve eternal life, so is it impossible to win in SMB! In this way, the spiral ears of the cute yet infantile and self-indulgent little monkeys become emblematic for SMB and the playing of computer games as such.

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