Incongruous Avatars and Hilarious Sidekicks: Design Patterns for Comical Game Characters

Claire Dormann
University of Ottawa
School of Information Studies
55 Laurier E., Ottawa ON K1N 6N5 Canada
613-562-5800 x4842
cdormann@uottawa.ca

Mish Boutet
University of Ottawa
School of Information Studies
55 Laurier E., Ottawa ON K1N 6N5 Canada
613-562-5800
mish.boutet@gmail.com

ABSTRACT
Integrating humour in games or designing humorous games can be challenging but rewarding. Contributing to practical knowledge of these contexts, we examine the role and value of humour in game character design. We begin with a brief review of main theories of humour. Next, we outline our methodology, describing steps taken to develop game design patterns on humour. From our investigation, we present a classification of comic characters and discuss a sampling of patterns for characters, highlighting design considerations particular to these. Then we enrich our collection by situating our character patterns within the comic worlds the characters inhabit. Our intent is to create tools that game designers can use for laughter-inducing entertainment, to generate new, amusing gameplay experiences.

Keywords
humour, comic, game design patterns, character design

INTRODUCTION
A common tendency is to think of humour only as fun. Indeed, fun has value and is an end in itself. People engage in the exchange of jokes and humorous exploits to provoke laughter and share pleasurable experiences. However, in addition to providing entertainment, integrating humour into videogames can serve social, emotional, and cognitive functions, providing players with benefits beyond laughter. This integration can be challenging, but the payoffs to well-implemented humour can be tremendous.

A major source of humour can come from games' characters. These characters can be humorous in appearance, speech, action, interactions, or gameplay mechanics.

For example, you have the risible visual design of the frog-like Globox in 2D platformer *Rayman Origins* (Ubisoft 2011).You have the dry wit of Nathan Drake in action-adventure *Uncharted 3* (Naughty Dog 2011). Or, you have the wobbly mechanics of an octopus disguised as a human in adventure *Octodad* (DePaul Game Experience 2010). Humour can also arise from characters' juxtapositions in unlikely environments or situations. Humour, and comic characters in particular, can increase a game's appeal and leave its mark on players. How much are our fond memories of LucasArts' adventures buoyed by their pantheon of compellingly comic characters and their interactions in the worlds around them?

To gain a better understanding of humour in game and game character design, we begin with a brief review of humour theories. From a survey of comical characters and analysis of gameplay examples, we present a classification of comic characters and a sampling of our game design patterns. Then, we discuss how to expand and enrich our collection of character patterns by situating them within the comic worlds they inhabit. In this paper, we highlight the potential of humour for character design and discuss factors affecting its design. We hope to provide better tools for designers to implement humour in games and create new comical games.

BACKGROUND ON HUMOUR AND THE COMIC

Humour is an essential component of communication and integral to popular culture. Among other things, it is used to communicate, consolidate, and negotiate differences of political, cultural, or social status. Its pairing with game design is a match well-made, for many designers, notwithstanding the desire to make "good games", also use games to communicate, negotiate, or transgress these very differences.

Humour is experienced by all, yet is difficult to capture and define. Humour has been described as a process, initiated by humorous stimuli and terminating with responses indicative of pleasure and joy, such as mirth, the most enduring property of humour (Gruner 1996). Following Martin (2007), humour is conceptualized and used in this paper as an overarching concept that includes different kinds of comic devices, such as wit, ridicule, or slapstick.

Three main classical theories of humour are superiority, relief, and incongruity theory (Meyer 2000). These three are neither incompatible nor exclusive, but highlight different aspects of humour. Superiority theory relates to social and power relations, while relief theory mainly addresses emotion, and incongruity theory connects to the cognitive side of humour (Raskin 1985).

Gruner (2011) views humour as playful aggression, with a winner and loser. Superiority humour is often connected to malice. People laugh because they feel superior to others. Think *Schadenfreude* and the nasty pleasure of balking at those who feature in reality television series. This kind of humour mocks people, making them appear ridiculous and refers to genres such as satire, sarcasm, and self-deprecation. In games, this kind of humour comes into play in first-person shooters and other competitive multiplayer games as a result of avatar death (Dormann and Biddle 2009). It is why we laugh at the overconfident Dan Hibiki from fighting game *Super Street Fighter IV* (Capcom 2010) or, in part, at the goofy Globox in *Rayman Origins*.

According to relief theory, humour results from releasing nervous energy. People experience humour, then laugh to reduce stress. The pleasurable aspect of humour, with its liberating effect, is often highlighted here. Relief humour may manifest in different ways, from dark, gallows humour, to sexual or "naughty" humour. *Leisure Suit Larry in the Land of the Lounge Lizards* (Sierra On-Line 1987) and its sequels, for example, featuring the misadventures of Larry Laffer, have their humour firmly entrenched within this theory. Relief theory is notably the most well-known aspect of humour in games, particularly in association with comic characters. A comic relief character lightens moods or diffuses tension through humour.

Finally, according to incongruity theory, people laugh at the unexpected or surprising (Berger 1993). Humour involves imagination and seeing things from unusual perspectives. This form of humour typically plays with different frames of reference, multiple meanings, ambiguity, and association. It includes forms of verbal humour, such as jokes and puns, as well as visual humour, such as sight gags. Some game character names contains puns, many examples of which are found in tower-defence *Plants vs. Zombies* (PopCap Games 2009), such as the peashooter, repeater, and threepeater plants that fire one, two, or three peas at a time respectively, to fend off zombies. Classic LucasArts adventures mastered incongruity with their delightful, if fiendishly difficult, puzzles.

COMIC CHARACTER PATTERNS

This paper stems from a broader investigation of humour in videogames and discovery of tools to assist in its design. We conducted interviews with players, drawing on their recollections of humorous game experiences. Within these interviews, numerous statements related to game characters, from their roles as comic relief to characters' snarky comments. As we too could recall comic characters from our play experiences, we decided to look closer at the design of comic characters and its value. Character design has been examined by developers and scholars (e.g. Meretzky 2001, Salen and Zimmerman 2004, Isbister 2006), but little has been written on characters and humour.

There exist numerous YouTube countdowns (of varying quality) and lists on prominent gaming sites on "the best comic characters". We thus conducted an extensive survey centred on humour in character design, which included reviewing game articles on humour, and mining reviews and forum discussions for references to humour in game characters. Listing the types of games and characters, and analyzing the parameters of humour in their representation gave us insight into dimensions of humour in character design.

To further analyze humour in context, we examined in-game moments related to humour in several popular games through inspection and gameplay. We also added examples derived from affective walkthroughs (a process detailed in Dormann et al., 2011) of comic LucasArts games conducted for another project. We then consolidated and conceptualized the knowledge derived from the review and gameplay into emergent humour patterns. In game design, patterns have been used as a problem-solving method or a way of codifying design knowledge (Björk and Holopainen 2005). Our patterns are descriptions of recurring aspects of game design concerning humour, with a focus on intentional, scripted humour, rather than players' emergent humour. We then reviewed

and refined patterns, adding further examples for deeper insight and to ensure pattern validity.

Classification of Comic Characters

From our analysis, we developed a multi-dimensional classification of comic characters. Although this classification does not exhaust all kinds of characters found in games, it does encompass all recurring humorous examples discovered through our survey.

The overarching dimensions of the classification (see table 1) are 1) the characters' main type and prominence, 2) the characters' role, and 3) the characters' humoristic style. Combined, these dimensions suggest dynamics that can exist between characters and players, and forms of humour ideally suited to those dynamics. They also suggest the frequency or duration characters will appear, further constraining humorous possibilities. Lastly, the classification opens up different potentialities as the dimensions are combined in different ways.

Player, character and game	Role	Humour style
Player's avatar	Protagonist	Sense of humour
Comic avatar	Hero	Witty
- Single, or	Anti-hero	Sarcastic
- Selected among other	Baddie	Comic style
playable characters		Comic Sociopath
Comic duo	Comic Ally	Lovable losers
- Control both	Sidekick/Companion	Tricksters
characters as a single	Unit/Pet	Wacky, comic fun
unit, or	Guide/Mentor	Parody
- Control alternates		Comic interrelationship
Comic party	Comic Enemy	Comic duos
- Controlled as a party,	Enemy/Obstacle	- Playboy and killjoy
or	Competitor	- Contrasting comics
- Control alternates	Boss	Comic ensemble
	Archenemy	
NPCs		
Main characters	Other Comic NPCs	
Secondary characters	Trader/Informant/Quest-	
Peripheral characters	giver/Aid-seeker	
	Narrator/Announcer	

Table 1: Classification of comic characters.

In *player, character and games*, the player's avatar or avatars require consideration as well as their representation type. Some games offer no choice in avatar while others allow selection from a range of avatars. Another consideration is how many avatars players have: a single avatar, a duo, or a party. At this level, non-player characters (NPCs) are divided by their prominence, as main, secondary, or peripheral NPCs. This dimension affects the humorous texture of games, the humorous affordances than can be exploited, and the roles characters can have.

Our second category relates to *role*. Avatars are predominantly heroes, but can be anti-heroes or baddies, while NPCs can be allies, enemies, or hold a neutral relationship with the player's avatar. Comic allies subdivide into sidekicks, units, and guides. Comic sidekicks, or companions, are friends to the player character. Comic units lie under the player character's command. Guides direct the player character.

Enemies divide according to how often player characters are likely to encounter them and for how long (Isbister 2006). Common enemies and obstacles tend to be weaker, while bosses, competitors, and archenemies tend to be stronger and play larger roles.

Other NPCs are more peripheral and can serve as traders, informants, quest-givers or aid-seekers. Also, narrators or announcers appear on occasion to move plot forward through voiceover. NPCs' roles influence the styles and functions of humour they employ.

Our last category covers *humour style* and representation. Bergson (1970) states that humour and laughter can arise from people's characteristics, such as shape, appearance, behaviour, morality, or personality. Characters, such as *Uncharted 3*'s Nathan Drake, can be endowed with a sense of humour, considered a highly valued characteristic (Strommen and Alexander 1999). They can be designed after prototypical comic characters that we laugh at or with. Style of humour can enable variations of gameplay and player engagement.

Comic Character Patterns

From our analysis, we have identified game patterns elaborating on design considerations related to humour, the most prominent of which—COMIC AVATAR, COMIC SIDEKICK, COMIC DUO, COMIC BOSS, COMIC SOCIOPATH, and LOVABLE LOSER—are discussed here. Björk and Holopainen's (2005) pattern collection includes AVATAR and BOSS MONSTER, but we have developed specifically humour-oriented patterns that diverge from these in content. Our patterns apply equally to comic games and to more serious games that include moments of humour, except where discussed within the patterns.

Comic avatar

Definition: A COMIC AVATAR is a humorous player character.

Problem/goal: The AVATAR is the player's representation in the game world. Through IDENTIFICATION, the player can, to some degree, vicariously live the life of the character. In many games, strong, heroic AVATARS can make players feel heroic; meanwhile, COMIC AVATARS can entertain players, as well as make them feel like they are in on jokes.

Solution: COMIC AVATARS can be ever-present elements generating constant comic content. The rules of comedy for COMIC AVATARS, in terms of superiority theory, are not the same as those for protagonists in other media and must be approached differently. Designer Ron Gilbert (2004) states:

> [W]e love to laugh at bad things happening to other people. It's funny to laugh at the main character in a movie dealing with one travesty after another or being made a fool of, but in a game, the main character is us. Now these bad things are happening to us, not someone else, and if those bad things are preventing us from making progress in the game, that's not funny, that's frustrating.

Specific consideration should occur with superiority humour, which has great comic potential as we will see with LOVABLE LOSERS.

In all likelihood, some players will identify with any given AVATAR while it will distract others. Games can thus have a set of selectable characters, including one or more COMIC AVATARS among the roster. This allows for different gameplay experiences, including ones for players who want to engage more in comic fun.

Examples: In the adventure *The Secret of Monkey Island* (Lucasfilm Games 1990) and its sequels, Guybrush Threepwood is a COMIC AVATAR. Guybrush has been described as a "wannabe pirate and the LOVABLE LOSER of the story, as he tries and tries and tries (and fails and fails and fails)" (Moore 2011). Throughout the series, Guybrush makes humorous comments about things players do. Although a LOVABLE LOSER, he still has wit, and can hold his own during insult sword fights. The comedy he generates is enhanced by other characters, and by the series' plots, environments, and situations.

In the action role-playing game *DeathSpank* (Hothead Games 2010) and sequels, the title character is a COMIC AVATAR and parody of a valiant hero. He is broad-shouldered, strong-chinned, and fearless. He is also less intelligent, tactful, and virtuous than a typical hero. For example, DeathSpank mistakenly believes cows to be wise and cannot hide his repulsion for orphans. He engages in comic conversations with other characters, and makes humorous comments on the game's action.

Consequences of using the pattern: COMIC AVATARS may be more challenging in games with FIRST PERSON VIEWS. These likely contribute more verbal humour than visual humour, since players rarely see their AVATARS in these games (except, for example, during cut-scenes).

Comic duo
Definition: A COMIC DUO is a pair of player characters who act as a comic unit.

Problem/goal: Much humour relies on elements like timing, interaction, and context. If the player character explores a game world alone, that character may have few opportunities to produce humour through interaction with others; however, COMIC DUOS do not have this concern.

Solution: COMIC DUOS are common in film and television. Each member offers the other opportunities for timing, interaction, and context-based humour. COMIC DUOS often act as foils for each other, possessing contrasting and complementary characteristics.

COMIC DUOS have two typical configurations. In one, both characters are comic, although each generally has a different style of humour. In the other, one character is comic while the other is non-comic, but can still set up comic opportunities for the comic character, and can still find himself or herself in comic situations.

Examples: Sam the dog and Max the rabbit from adventure *Sam & Max Hit the Road* (LucasArts 1993b) and later episodic sequels are a COMIC DUO where both characters are comic. Max is a sociopathic loose cannon, while Sam's comic delivery is more deadpan. Their COMIC BANTER and interactions during their misadventures are a great source of humour.

Banjo the bear and Kazooie the bird from 3D platformer *Banjo Kazooie* (Rare 1998) and sequels are another COMIC DUO. In this pair, Banjo is the straight bear while Kazooie is a comic, sharp-tongued wisebird who resides in Banjo's backpack.

Consequences of using the pattern: Superiority-based humour functions differently with COMIC DUOS than with other pairs of game characters, since COMIC DUOS are both player characters, and players have stronger IDENTIFICATION with both members of the duo. Since much of a duo's humour depends on its specific dynamics, there exist few examples of selectable or customizable COMIC DUOS.

Comic sidekick

Definition: A COMIC SIDEKICK is a humorous NPC who accompanies and/or assists and/or advises the player character for at least part of a game.

Problem/goal: In some games, a COMIC AVATAR might not be appropriate. For example, Björk and Holopainen (2005) caution that AVATARS with strong personalities "can prevent the players from interpreting what they want into the Avatar's actions" (p. 78). In such games, comic NPCs can be included for humour instead.

Solution: A COMIC SIDEKICK recurrently accompanies a player character through a game to provide humour or comic relief, and companionship. COMIC SIDEKICKS can also assist, advise, and guide players. COMIC SIDEKICKS avoid the issue of compromising players' associations with their AVATARS, and can act as foils, showing different values or interpretations of game events from those of players or their AVATARS.

The use of a COMIC SIDEKICK allows for comic dialogue and relationship-building, which would be absent from games where player characters proceed alone. COMIC SIDEKICKS can also provide players with information they might otherwise not know.

Examples: In action-adventure *inFamous* (Sucker Punch 2009) and its sequel, the AVATAR character Cole McGrath has a comparatively neutral personality. This is necessitated by the game's design, which allows players to play Cole as either a good or evil character. Whether Cole becomes good or evil, his best friend, Zeke Dunbar, is the COMIC SIDEKICK. Zeke provides humorous commentary on Cole's experiences, joins Cole in early tutorial-style levels, and advises Cole throughout the game series by communicating via mobile phone. Not only does Zeke add humour, he also acts as Cole's and the player's foil.

Another example of a COMIC SIDEKICK is Murray the hippo from *Sly Cooper and the Thievius Raccoonus* (Sucker Punch 2002) (in sequels, Murray also becomes a playable character). Murray is a large, strong, loyal friend to Sly and has comic one-liners like, "Another barrier stands before you. Fear not, I shall bend it like the truth!"

Consequences of using the pattern: While COMIC DUOS, as far as we know, are found only in comic games, it is possible to find COMIC SIDEKICKS in otherwise non-comic games. Challenges to implementing COMIC SIDEKICKS may include finding the balance between maximizing comic potential without characters becoming too obtrusive, particularly in otherwise non-comic games.

Comic boss

Definition: A COMIC BOSS is a humour-infused major enemy, with comedy arising from the enemy's personality, or from the fight with the enemy, or both.

Problem/goal: Bosses are powerful enemy characters that generally offer greater challenge and require additional effort to overcome than standard enemies or obstacles. This can lead to moments of increased TENSION for the player.

Solution: One way to mitigate TENSION during a boss fight is with a COMIC BOSS. A COMIC BOSS that provides humour while the player challenges it can provide comic relief. Humour can arise from the boss itself or from the method by which the player overcomes the boss, or both, which can create unique gameplay experiences. Skill must be exercised to ensure that the COMIC BOSS's style of humour works well with the COMIC AVATAR's.

Examples: In action-adventure *Conker's Bad Fur Day* (Rare 2001), Conker the squirrel encounters COMIC BOSS, The Great Mighty Poo, a large mound of feces with eyes, arms, and gaping mouth. The Great Mighty Poo sings operatically during the fight, making *Conker's Bad Fur Day* one of the few games with a boss fight that doubles as a musical number. Conker defeats the COMIC BOSS by throwing rolls of toilet paper into its mouth while it sings. Successive stages of the battle are marked by The Great Mighty Poo singing additional verses of its song.

In first-person puzzler *Portal 2* (Valve 2011), the personality core, Wheatley becomes a COMIC BOSS midway through the game. The final battle against Wheatley involves retrieving and attaching corrupted cores to him, causing him to shut down. Each of the three corrupted cores the player attaches to Wheatley has a distinct, comic personality—one is obsessed with outer space, one believes itself to be a hardened adventurer, and one rattles off bizarre and inaccurate "facts"—and each one rambles on to the player character while she attaches them to Wheatley.

Consequences of using the pattern: If a COMIC BOSS is challenging, the player may have to try multiple times before successfully defeating it. Elements that are funny when encountered the first time may become tedious by the fifth or sixth. For this reason, RANDOMNESS can be added so that the COMIC BOSS's performance varies each time; on the other hand, RANDOMNESS may complicate humour that relies on precise timing.

Comic sociopath

Definition: A COMIC SOCIOPATH is a character that lacks moral judgment and is without sensitivity to the emotions of others, but is designed in a humouristic way.

Problem/goal. Protagonists are often virtuous, stable-minded, and act for society's greater good, while the reverse is often true of villains. To get away from this simplistic dichotomy, one possibility is to introduce emotional disturbances in protagonist

characters that trigger negative emotions or events. However, this should be done in a way that is not disturbing for players; otherwise, they may not enjoy playing or identifying with sociopathic characters.

Solution. One method of integrating sociopathic attributes into protagonists is through the use of comedy. The sociopathic elements of the characters are defused through comic relief as we laugh at the character. These characters can be mean, sarcastic, or cruel but in comical ways by exaggerating traits or through parody of sociopathic individuals. They can open up different styles of humour, such as bleak or morbid humour.

Examples. As mentioned, Max the rabbit from the *Sam & Max* series possesses sociopathic traits through his selfish, impulsive, and violent behaviour. Max's actions are contrasted by the comparatively more relaxed and rational Sam. Players of the *Sam & Max* games must use Max's impulsive and radical style in combination with Sam's more methodical approach to solve mysteries, much in a good cop, bad cop style.

HK-47, from role-playing game *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (BioWare 2003), is an assassin droid at the player character's service. He has an understated demeanour that can be associated with butlers of English comedies, but he is also condescending, referring to humans as "meat bags". His insistence on killing everyone might be frightening, if it were not presented in such an incongruously funny manner.

Consequences of using the pattern: This pattern can be used for slapstick, or to portray more subtle and interesting, if neurotic, interactions between characters. The importance of the character, the degree of sociopathy, and humour design will interact with players' experiences. Care has to be taken to achieve the right balance to avoid negative results. The sociopathic character might need to be contrasted with more sympathetic characters so as to create an overall positive mood during gameplay.

Lovable losers
Definition: A LOVABLE LOSER is a character that is mostly incompetent or awkward but still manages some measure of success. Players laugh at LOVABLE LOSERS rather than with them.

Problem/goal: Many videogames centre on heroic performance, based on personal characteristics, strengths, and success. Heroes should always reach their goals. Overused, this can be monotonous and limiting. Moreover, in the comedy of life, we are not always successful, strong, and overachieving. The issue here is in introducing weaker characters that are still interesting, and that still undertake quests, move the plot forward, and struggle for a measure of success.

Solution: A solution is to introduce LOVABLE LOSERS, a kind of character frequently found in comedies, that solves one problem with catastrophic results leading to more problems, thus setting the plot in motion. Alternatively, they impair progress through their ineptitude. The characters' comedy works mostly through their personalities, and by their interactions with their surroundings, including other characters and objects. LOVABLE LOSERS tend to be cowardly, lacking in self-confidence, and socially awkward. Through their clumsiness, they can create chaos and mayhem. If they succeed it may be entirely by accident. We laugh at these characters, but often a little at ourselves too.

Examples: As mentioned, Guybrush Threepwood from the *Monkey Island* series is a LOVABLE LOSER, although he is somewhat more together than the typical loser. Bernard Bernoulli and Hoagie from adventure *Maniac Mansion: Day of the Tentacle* (LucasArts 1993a) are also LOVABLE LOSERS. Hoagie, although occasionally clever, is not always the brightest of the bunch. His kind of surfer dude, laid-back attitude is so completely at odds with the uppity historical characters he encounters that it is funny.

Wheatley in *Portal 2*, is the player's COMIC SIDEKICK for the first part of the game, and is another LOVABLE LOSER. Although he is an artificial intelligence, he is inept and unintelligent. He bumbles, makes clumsy blunders, and is often wrong. To his credit, he remains lovable (and a loser), even after becoming the game's main villain, and after the game is over, players are often quick to forgive him.

Consequences of using the pattern: The effect of this pattern will be different with a NPC like a sidekick than with an AVATAR. It is easier to design a sidekick which is the butt of jokes than a player character. Care has to be taken with this pattern that the character does not become too annoying. The pattern is more powerful with an AVATAR in terms of gameplay possibilities, but more difficult in terms of the AVATAR's design as we do not want to alienate players.

Expanding the Classification

We have developed comical character patterns from game dimensions that affect humorous design to designing humour itself. We hope to have demonstrated some of the dynamics inherent to humour in character design. There were limitations to the number of patterns we could present here.

We are still developing patterns connected to humour style and mechanics. We need to look closer at the dimensions of humour that affect game design decisions. Comic relief is often at the centre of comic character discussions. Indeed, we have found multiple examples of COMIC RELIEF characters in games, and we will integrate this pattern into our collection. However, as discussed, this is not the only function of humour. Besides relieving tension, humour can be used to add depth and personality to characters, enrich interactions, and provoke a range of emotions from players.

Lastly, there is another dimension missing from our classification. We have focused on scripted humour; however, players can generate humour as well. Some games allow customization, such as the creation of customized AVATARS. Thus players can create their own comic, carnivalesque characters that, for example, fight in their underpants or in pink tutus (Dormann 2012). Moreover, through their characters, players can engage in unpredictable behaviour or play subversively to engage in comic play.

COMIC CHARACTERS AND THEIR WORLDS

We have presented a classification of comic patterns, centred on game characters. However, any humour associated with characters cannot be fully detached from nor realised without those characters' interactions with the game worlds they inhabit. Characters interact with other characters and with game objects, and are influenced by and directed through quests, storylines, and game mechanics. Thus, to situate our comic

character patterns within a broader context, building on what we have already discussed in the character patterns themselves, we can begin developing additional patterns.

We can have game patterns related to speech, such as dialogue or other speech acts, as well as character-character interaction. As mentioned in COMIC AVATAR and COMIC SIDEKICK, humour can be used in conversations to enhance expressiveness by making them surprising, playful, delightful, or controversial. A sociopathic character could engage in COMIC TAUNTING, while a wacky character would engage in jokes. Some of these patterns are humorous tropes in themselves such as PUNNING, or wisecracks, while others require the integration of humorous mechanisms into the conversational patterns such as COMIC BANTER or COMIC TAUNTS.

PUNNING is playing with words, creating ambiguity and multiple associations, stimulating mirth. We have expanded PUNNING from puns to include other kinds of textual humour based on incongruity, such as, wisecracks, one-liners and jokes. As mentioned, PUNNING appears in the names of characters in *Plants vs. Zombies*, and is also abundant in *Grand Theft Auto IV* (Rockstar North 2008) and LucasArts adventure games. For example, the following exchange occurs during an insult sword fight in *The Secret of Monkey Island*: "This is the END for you, you gutter-crawling cur!" / "And I've got a little TIP for you, get the POINT?" As mentioned with Sam and Max, COMIC BANTER refers to a comic verbal exchange between two characters, going back and forth. COMIC TAUNTS are humorous gestures and comments to goad and provoke opponents (usually into fighting). This pattern can lead to comic fights, such as the insult sword fighting mentioned. Other examples of COMIC TAUNTING can be found in *Super Street Fighter IV*, such as Dan Hibiki's seven-second-long "super taunt".

As seen in LOVABLE LOSERS, another series of comic patterns derive from characters interacting with game objects. Examples include COMIC ARMAMENTS or COMIC MAYHEM. Armaments are tools that incapacitate, injure, or kill characters. COMIC ARMAMENTS can introduce an element of surprise and incongruity, making confrontations with these weapons funny, and thus changing the player's game experience. For example, in *Portal 2*, turrets are deadly devices that fire at anything that moves; however, turrets have incongruously innocent-sounding voices that ask, "are you still there?" when players move out of sight, and cry, "ow ow ow!" when knocked over. In the survival horror *Dead Rising 2* (Blue Castle Games 2010), the player's AVATAR takes out zombies with all kinds of unlikely weapons, such as wheelchairs and lawnmowers. Furthermore, players can combine objects to craft even more bizarre weapons to dispatch the undead. COMIC MAYHEM is a sequence of actions resulting in chaos and/or destruction, done with decisively comic intent. Reminiscent of madcap cartoons, an event will trigger a chain reaction, sending objects crashing and flying everywhere. *Burnout Crash!* (Criterion Games 2011), a spin-off game of the *Burnout* driving series, focuses entirely on orchestrating large car crashes.

We have highlighted in this paper, patterns related to the comedy of characters and the comedy of objects (see table 2). However, many more humour patterns could come from additional sources, especially from game mechanics, an area with perhaps the most potential for innovative gameplay.

Name	Definition
COMIC AVATAR	A humorous player character
COMIC DUO	A pair of player characters who act as a comic unit
COMIC SIDEKICK	A humorous NPC who accompanies and/or assists and/or advises the player character for at least part of a game
COMIC BOSS	A humour-infused major enemy, with comedy arising from the enemy's personality, or from the fight with the enemy, or both
COMIC SOCIOPATH	A character that lacks moral judgment and is without sensitivity to the emotions of others, but is designed in a humoristic way
LOVABLE LOSER	A character that is mostly incompetent or awkward but still manages some measure of success. Players laugh at LOVABLE LOSERS rather than with them.
PUNNING	Playing with words, creating ambiguity and multiple associations, stimulating mirth
COMIC BANTER	A comic verbal exchange between two characters , going back and forth
COMIC TAUNT	Humorous gestures and comments to goad and provoke opponents (usually into fighting)
COMIC ARMAMENTS	Weapons that introduce an element of surprise and incongruity into the gameplay
COMIC MAYHEM	A sequence of actions resulting in chaos and/or destruction, with decisively comic intent

Table 2: Comic patterns

DISCUSSION

We wish to highlight the power of humour in games, to design more comical characters, make games more fun, and, ideally, trigger renewed interest in comical game design. Beyond a few jokes, the odd funny character, or quotes copied from other comic sources, humour can be integrated more consistently in games, for everyone's merriment.

In general, humour makes characters more interesting and enjoyable. Bear (2010) contends that good character design contributes to a game's personality, which in turn makes it memorable and develops fan bases. Humour can be an important trait for game characters (Nijholt 2002). During quests, a COMIC AVATAR can engage in COMIC BANTER to amuse others, creating group cohesiveness with his or her party and reducing interpersonal tension. Indeed, humour has a strong value for socio-emotional interaction that designers can build on to create richer, more believable characters. With humour, they can depict feelings of intimacy and closeness, or provoke sympathy for the plight of fellow members. They can also show annoyance and aggressiveness in more playful ways. In first-person shooters, COMIC AVATARS can be more sarcastic, disparaging, and taunting of their mates to get them to move quicker, while COMIC SOCIOPATH sergeants can create havoc and increase adrenaline for the entertainment of players. There are endless possibilities for creating humorous and comical characters to make games more fun and exciting. It has to be noted that the degree and style of humour can interact on

one hand with believability (sense of humour) and on the other with suspension of disbelief (slapstick/wacky comedy). Ultimately, humour can have a profound effect on players' experiences, and ensure or enhance a game's success.

As we have detailed the mechanics of humour for game characters, we want to outline a few additional issues to be considered in the design of humour. There are factors that affect humour use and appreciation, such as gender and cultural differences. Humour is culturally dependent and is instantiated differently in diverse cultures, which mediates its effects and complicates, for example, how games are localized (Mangiron 2010). Kotthoff (2006) presents a comprehensive view of gender differences in humour and of the gendered politics of humour. She highlights four key areas in which gender differences affect humour: status, aggressiveness, social alignment, and sexuality. Kotthoff also discusses stereotypes and the marginalization of women in their production of humour. In turn, we have found very few female characters that are comical or have a sense of humour. The problem is highlighted by the words of a player:

> A girl [character] can't be funny because they're always expected to be cute or sexy. It's pretty tough to be a good joke if you are limited in the ugly, goofy faces you can make. She would have to be totally unconcerned with looks, which is a big "no-no" in any video game. (DarkBlueAnt 2010)

Really! Nevertheless, psycho-demographic factors should be studied further in the context of humour and videogames. Ultimately, humour is a personal matter. What one finds funny, another does not. This is always a trade-off. Take Duke Nukem, most recently seen in first-person shooter *Duke Nukem Forever* (Gearbox Software 2011). Some find his testosterone-fuelled lampooning of action heroes comical, while others find it crude and offensive. Similarly, Daxter the otter-like ottsel, from *Jak & Daxter: The Precursor Legacy* (Naughty Dog 2001) and sequels has been praised by some as the best comic character, even winning an original character award at the 2002 Game Developers Conference, but has also panned by others as the most annoying character. Thus, as Schafer once suggested, humour needs to be carefully planned and integrated congruently into games either with nuance and subtlety, or with an abundance of crazy COMIC MAYHEM (Gonzales 2005). It should also carefully be tested so that the game is exonerated from its few disgruntled players by legions more enthusiastic and delighted players.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we put forth game patterns for comical characters. From our initial survey, we developed a multi-dimensional classification of comic characters discovered in games. We outlined these dimensions as the characters' type and prominence, the characters' role, and the characters' humoristic style. We then presented sample patterns, highlighting different functions of humour and factors mediating character design. Next, we expanded on the character patterns within the game space by showing how comic patterns can be derived from characters' interactions with other characters or objects around them. Finally, we reviewed and highlighted the benefits of humour in character design as well as outlined issues related to the design of humour. Developing this pattern collection also gave us insight into interesting problematics for research on humour and games, such as exploring the relation of gender or culture and humour, or anti-patterns (i.e. when humour misfires or backfires) in game design.

There are limitations to this paper, as stated, in terms of the number of patterns we could present in a single paper. We have discussed the patterns with different stakeholders and plan to use these patterns in our own practices for developing new game concepts, but also in conjunction with interested partners, for serious or experimental games.

The patterns presented in this paper form part of a greater endeavour to develop a humour pattern language for games. We envisage that as long-term process, as we synthesize more games and more game types into our analysis, such as mobile games. We plan to explore more specifically the potential of comic game mechanics for a range of games, from adventure games to more experimental creations. Especially interesting is providing ways for players to create their own comic fun. Ultimately, we aim to offer tools for designers to embed humour in games, to stimulate innovative gameplay and new comical game experiences. Our growing corpus of interrelated patterns compile and classify comic configurations employed in games so far, as well as present potentialities to be exploited in new ways in future games.

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