Whose pain is it, anyway? On avatar embodiment, slapstick performances, and virtual pain

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This article investigates the relationship of the player and her avatar in humorous single-player video games. Referring to slapstick performance characteristics and their perception as described by Louise Peacock (2014), it discusses the concepts of empathic and goal-oriented engagement by Petri Lankoski (2010), and proxy embodiment by Rune Klevjer (2012) along *Manual Samuel* (Perfectly Paranormal 2016), and *Octodad: Dadliest Catch* (Young Horses 2014). Considering mastery in ludic performance, and punishment for lack thereof, it focuses the tension between pain represented in avatar corporeality, and pain experienced by the player due to failing. Thus, this article provides a perspective that constructs the avatar-player-relationship in single-player video games as a *central double act* typical to slapstick performances.

Keywords:
video game; slapstick; avatar; embodiment; violence; engagement; performance

Introduction

The avatar in single-player video games covers different functionalities for the gameplay process. It serves as an instrument for the player to interact with the game mechanics. It also represents the player in the virtual game world, enabling her to take action that could be described as quasi-social. Apart from this, the avatar is a fictional character within the game world, subject to dramaturgical means to various ends.

In this article, I will investigate the mediality of slapstick gameplay. I will discuss video game players as slapstick performers and the relationship towards their avatars under the lens of the central double act, a figuration inherited from more traditional performance practices. I will also describe slapstick gameplay as a design practice and point out how it utilises the tension of ludic and narrative design elements to conceptualise the player as both a performer and a spectator of her avatar. Since slapstick appears as a comical practice relying on physical jokes and pain, I will ask in what way this pain can be inflicted on the player in virtual environments. Central theoretical models

to my approach will be empathic and goal-related engagement (Lankoski 2010), proxy embodiment (Klevjer 2012), and a theory of slapstick pain and appreciation (Peacock 2014). On this basis, I will argue that the player therefore is able to re-interpret emotional pain due to ludic failure by separation of her body-subject from her body-object.

Humorous Play

Humour in video games has been researched, but not to a great extent. A strongly design-focused approach can be found on online platforms like *Gamasutra* or *Gamespot* that provide articles from game journalists, designers and scholars, reflecting on both humorous game design in general (Gonzalez 2004, Mackey 2009, Jack 2011, Cook 2012, Sanderson 2013, Wawro 2015, Shaik 2016) and on the design of specific games (e.g. Couture 2016, Wawro 2018). Also, some lectures from the Game Developers Conferences adress this subject (Burch 2013, Quinn 2015).

In one of the earliest academic approaches on humour in video games, Dormann, Barr, and Biddle (2006) argue that "humour itself stimulates engagement and provides a pleasurable experience" (96). They find humorous elements in gameplay that fit the three most influential branches of humour theories (superiority, relaxation, and incongruity theories). In their work, the twofold quality of gameplay, covering games as aesthetic artefacts and play as a performative process, already looms. In semistructured interviews about gamers' humour experiences, Dormann and Biddle (2009) continue this research. They describe humorous elements in many dimensions of video gaming, stating that "humor provides an acceptable way of criticizing | players or of inviting a player to accept failure" (812-813), "to relieve boredom, frustration, and guilt and instead provide enjoyment and fun" (814). Though considering humour that is triggered by narrative means of the game world, they emphasise the importance of ludic and performative elements, stating that

> players deliberately choose to engage in 'comic play' as opposed to 'serious play,' trying by all possible means to distort the game to create fun. It seems that this kind of humor allows an element of creativity or freedom in the game-play. Humor thus supports agency with the player's | thrill in having an effect on the game wor[l]d (Dormann and Biddle 2009, 809-810).

Conjoining video games and aesthetic theory, Graeme Kirkpatrick (2011) investigates both the effort made to win a game and the interaction of human being and game controller from the perspective of Bergsonian jokes. He draws a direct connection between losing in a video game to Henri Bergson's observation that "we become comical when our actions resemble those of a machine" (107):

> When we 'die' in the game and throw our controllers across the room in frustration we become ridiculous to ourselves and others. The machine-like nature of our movements during play looms large and, normally, this, along with the knowledge that it was always going to end that way, is a source of amusement, which, while pleasurable also includes an element of discomfort. Laughter here, as elsewhere, includes a disciplinary component for Bergson, since it tells people when they are being ridiculous and ridicule is something we avoid. […] The more intense our involvement with a video game the greater the tension [of the hands on the controller] and the more we are exposed to comic possibilities of this kind. […] The controller's role here is to keep the player physically attached to the game, while remaining out of view. (Kirkpatrick 2011, 108)

Research that concentrates on slapstick in video games is even rarer, yet it mostly focuses on the role of the player in the context of other players, fostering a theatrical or para-theatrical paradigm. Jaroslav Švelch (2014) investigates slapstick video clips captured and staged in video game spaces (*machinima*, see Nitsche 2011) by gamers he calls *mischief makers*. Švelch approaches slapstick gameplay in consideration of mostly unwilling ridicule of the game software as an object, drawing attention on the technical and ludo-performative mastery involved in *machinima* creation.

Ben Hudson (2014) analyses slapstick gameplay with an emphasis on technical aspects of simulation and immersion in video games. He claims that they "have their own intrinsic man-made qualities that are often unintentionally funny or can be exploited for comic value" (109). He mentions the avatar as an entity of Bergsonian "*mechanical inelasticity*" (109), drawing incongruities from the imperfectness that needs to be admitted for any simulation. A lot of Hudson's attention is, however, aimed at subversion towards, transgression from and exploitation of the rules of multiplayer games. This not only includes *cheating* in the sense of breaking procedural rules[1], but also mischievous interaction in multiplayer games as a comic practice similar to slapstick comedy – *trolling*, as gamer slang might put it. In these kinds of performances, Hudson argues, players enact the Jungian 'trickster' archetype, or his cousin, the 'fool' (113). Following Mary Douglas (1999), he states that joking temporarily suspends the social structure of potentially affected players as a group, and that joking represents an attack on control, in this case an anarchistic, subversive practice attacking the control of social and procedural rules. He claims:

> Players live out a paradox in their virtual exploits, feeling an immersion and embodiment in the game-world and their player avatars, whilst contending with and confronting a mechanical and inhuman simulation. It is here that the potential for videogame slapstick resides. (Hudson 2014, 112)

Another implicit approach to slapstick gameplay can be found in the phenomenon of *abusive game design* as described by Douglas Wilson and Miguel Sicart (2010). Here, the player becomes subject to the game designer's cruelty. She might be tortured physically, by unfair difficulties in level design, by lying to her in implementing surprising counter-intuitive and mostly surprising mechanics, by assaulting her bodily senses with ugly visualisation, spinning motion, noise or even stench, and by attacking her social relations through provocative game mechanics.[2] As a political practice of user-*un*friendliness, abusive game design "overcomes the instrumentality of the game-as-system paradigm by framing play as a personal affair" (Wilson and Sicart 2010, 42). Wilson and Sicart focus on games as media for a dialogue between players and game designers. Both approaches avoid single-player games in which the avatar's corporeality is subject to slapstick, and they do not touch on the discourses on involvement nor embodiment.

In her Master thesis, Anne-Marie Grönroos (2013) classifies this approach as satirical, comparative to satirical elements in the *Grand Theft Auto* series (Rockstar North, since 1997) examined by Dymek and Lennerfors (2005), and Ouellette (2010), or in internet flash games as discussed by Madsen and Johansson (2002). Referring to slapstick in the *Angry Birds* series (Rovio Entertainment, since 2009), she states that "complex animations are not necessary for video game slapstick, and the main star in these games is the physics engine combined with the funny

character designs" (Grönroos 2013, 31), also accounting for violence as a "natural foray for video games" (ibid.), though stating possible exceptions. Parsing genres, she observes: "Slapstick and parody are probably the most effective modes for humour derived from game mechanics, but game mechanics should receive serious consideration in relation to any type of comedy or humour" (Grönroos 2013, 40).

Krista Bonello (2015) discusses humorous self-reflexivity in adventure games since the 1980's, focusing nostalgia and parody, yet also jokes at the player's expanse as a gameplay mechanic. In this, adventure games provide a strategy of estrangement in a Brechtian sense.[3] Bonello states:

> While the self-reflexivity of genre and meta-mediality also function here as part of the gameworld, interruptions becoming part of the gameplay, there is a resistance to complete and seamless reincorporation, highlighting the mediality on a level accessible to the player. (Bonello 2015)

From these observations, it seems safe to say that slapstick humour in video gameplay occurs in various dimensions: it is identifiable in the process of playing itself which can be transgressive or violent in terms of interaction among players and towards the game rules. Especially notions of failure, by technical shortcomings of games as simulations as well as by players failing to reach ludic goals and experiencing anger over it, seem to be a ridiculous experience in a slapstick way. Slapstick gameplay as a game design paradigm may be abusive and/or estranging in the sense that it subverts the player's expectations about narration and ludition, her chance to succeed in respects of ludic and/or narrative evaluation, and even the borders of her social body, the definition and separation of her role inside or outside the game's borders.[4] It may also utilise the avatar's body as subject to slapstick player performance, submitting it to physical jokes and virtual pain by relying on game physics, animation, and motion control. However, the specific interdependencies of the avatar's virtual pain and the player's pain experienced when failing still seem unexplored.

Engagement to Player Characters

In which way is playing a video game avatar comparable to performing slapstick? According to Schröter (2016), players experience video game characters in a threefold framing of player consciousness, in which the attention may be allocated to a *narrative mode* (characters as fictional beings, inspiring fiction-related emotions), a *ludic mode* (characters as game pieces inspiring gameplay emotions), and a *social mode* (characters as representations of other players, inspiring social or quasi-social emotions). (see Schröter 2016, 38) These modes may overlap, and shifting between them can occur very swiftly. For the narrative mode, Schröter suggests an analytic approach towards the domains of *corporeality* (general appearance of character body representation), *mind* (personality traits, thoughts, emotions, motivations), and *sociality* (social roles and interactions). Especially the domain of *mind* may conflict with game rules and technological constraints. (40)

It is important to emphasise that the social mode also refers to fictional aspects within the game world, its characters, and the avatar as one among them. In *Character-Driven Game Design*, Petri Lankoski (2010) describes the player's engagement to the avatar, distinguishing between *goal-related engagement* and *empathic engagement*. Generally speaking, "anthropomorphic agents, such as game characters, also trigger […] specialized brain functions used in everyday people-to-people interactions" (Lankoski 2010, 96), as "[t]he same areas of the brain are activated when one perceives affective expressions and goal-directed actions as when one is experiencing | affects and performing goal-directed actions" (96-97). Prerequisite for successful empathic engagement with a fictional character is *allegiance* as introduced by Smith (1995) for film theory, typically depending on a "morally desirable (or at least preferable) set of traits, in relation to other characters within the fiction" (Smith 1995, 188; quoted from Lankoski 2010, 106).[5] However, goal-oriented engagement can block empathic engagement, "so that affects such as pleasure and fear are based on successes and threats. In this case*, affective mimicry* [involuntary and automatical mirroring of another person's mimics] and *simulation* ['as-if' reasoning about another person's affective state and emotional processing/simulating thereof] has little role in engagement." (Lankoski 2010, 107)

This is true for the video game, as it also seems to be true for the duality of role and actor in theatrical make-believe. A comparable approach on engagement with a fictional character can be found in rehearsal of professional actors in which they "engage in imaginative practices in order to non-judgmentally attune to the character" (Gallagher, and Gallagher 2019, 6), as an "evaluative judgment can rob an actor of empathy, creating too much distance or separation between the actor and the character" (ibid.). Gallagher and Gallagher therefore distinguish "between an empathic understanding of the character, and an evaluative judgment about the character" (ibid.). Furthermore, while performing, the actor's engagement is a matter of double attunement, a continuous shifting between "subpersonal (motoric, kinaesthetic, affective) processes", and the aforementioned "higher-order empathic understanding" (10). Similar to mastering motion control in an action video game, "accomplishing this double attunement takes rehearsal and work which are transformed into performance" (ibid.). Since physical humour dominates traditional slapstick performances (see Peacock 2014), the attunement there most likely emphasises the control of subpersonal processes. To put it in Schröter's terms: The slapstick performer needs to attune her own *corporeality* to the character's emotionally and cognitively synthetisised *mind* in order to perform *social* interactions with both other characters/actors and the spectators. As Lankoski might put it, her engagement in these interactions is rather *goal-related* than *empathic* as her artistic performance utilises carefully rehearsed means of timing, motion and mimics in order to achieve a certain response of the audience and her co-performers.

Like a slapstick performer, the video game player both performs the role of a fictional character in the game world, and tries to achieve a ludic goal, using the avatar as a persona and an instrument. This also stands to reason considering the definition provided by Louise Peacock (2014) in *Slapstick and Comedy Performance: Comedy and Pain:*

> [In] order to be considered slapstick, a comedy, regardless of the media for which it is created should include all (or most) of the following: a central double act; comic pain and comic violence; falling and tripping; malicious props (the falling piano and the collapsing ladder); | throwing of objects (often but not always food, particularly pies); and stunts and acrobatics. Many of these are conveyed through the physical skill and mastery of the performer and are supported by sound effects. Beyond this we would expect to see some central absurdity, which may be enhanced by one or more of the following: a lack of reality, use of excess, or transgression. (Peacock 2014, 31-32)

Peacock also identifies structural elements that affect the dynamics of slapstick performance, the "most obvious of these are repetition, inversion, anticipation, escalation and timing" (Peacock 2014, 40). Referring to the arguments mentioned above, to Kirkpatrick's notion that "repetitious use of the controller is about mastering complex sequences that vary enormously within each game" (Kirkpatrick 2011, 100), and relying on Richard Schechner's (2013) statement "However one looks at it, play and playing are fundamentally performative" (121), I would like to argue that playing video games can be considered slapstick performance in the sense Peacock puts it.

While in multi-player games, as described by Hudson, slapstick gameplay is a matter of social interaction of players via avatars, I argue that in single-player games the fictional aspect with its quasi-social implications as described by Schröter is bound to be the centre of slapstick gameplay. There are no spectators around to respond to ludic/performative success or failure, nor to a presentation of slapstick-induced pain. Instead, the player both watches and is represented by the avatar whose corporeality might become subject to slapstick pain, most likely in games with third-person-perspective that permanently display the avatar's corporeality. Referring to Peacock's observations, we can find status interactions in terms of the struggle of the player against the game's rule and input system on the one hand, and, making ludic failure a personal matter, a notion of vengeance in the virtual damage dealt to the avatar's corporeality on the other. To put it playfully: The avatar *is* the central double-act in single-player slapstick gameplay.

Virtual Comic Pain

What are the phenomenological differences of a slapstick performer's body and a player avatar's body in slapstick gameplay in terms of slapstick perception and slapstick performance? According to Peacock, the perception process of slapstick performances entails four consecutive steps. (see Peacock 2014, 73-80) First, the performance must be *recognised* as 'meant to be funny', and therefore a *comic frame* of perception needs to be established. Recognition of the frame requires a certain amount of cultural knowledge in order to put aesthetic clues, slapstick conventions as described in her definition, into context: sound effects, character stereotypes, costumes, stage props and acting strategies of timing and acrobatics are some of those, as is physical 'otherness' "that sets the performed character apart from the average person" (Peacock 2014, 74).

Obviously, some games emphasise the slapstick potential of video gaming more than others. Dialogue, sound effects, cartoony visualisation may indicate a humorous game in general, anticipation and escalation may

serve as common dramaturgical patterns for narrative structure. Furthermore, the medium of the video game itself could benefit the establishment of a comic frame because their virtual environment is "immersive, yet incongruous with the experience of reality" (Hudson 2014, 109), and because the emotional attachment to the playing process might bear comic potential in itself. (see Kirkpatrick 2011, 109)[6]

Embodied Understanding

The second step in the slapstick perception process is *embodied understanding*. In this, the audience members "go through an instinctive process of matching their body to the performer's body" (Peacock 2014, 75). Then, they swiftly judge whether or not they find congruity in terms of ability and willingness to perform such action themselves. The process of physical empathy, the evaluation of ability, can either lead to an *identified* (if they find congruity) or to an *unidentified embodied understanding* (if this is not the case). Peacock also mentions the importance not only of the bodies but also in the situation they are in: "[The] degree of incongruity that is likely to be acceptable will be affected by the nature of the comic frame already established" (Peacock 2014, 76).

If we considered the player as a mere spectator of gameplay, we could apply those statements seamlessly to video games. In Lankoski's terms, we would state a process of empathic engagement. As a performer however, the player most likely shares goal-oriented engagement with the avatar, complicating the issue of embodied understanding. Concepts deriving from neuro-physiology and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (2010) seem helpful to untangle it.

Referring to Merleau-Ponty, Shaun Gallagher (1986) has introduced the terms *body image* as an immediate and conscious perception of the body, a construct of intellectual emotional, and perceptive aspects (545-546), and *body schema* as a non-conscious, anonymous performance, yet "in a holistic and unified fashion" (551) in which the body "most genuinely lives as a body environment" (552). Examining game interfaces, Gregersen and Grodal (2009) emphasise the flexibility of these psychological concepts that enable us to "include parts of our environment into our intentional projects as clothes, cane, and even automobiles may become integrated parts of our embodied activity" (68). This integration may also extend on virtually represented objects Thus, Gregersen and Grodal argue

> that interacting with videogames may lead to a sense of extended embodiment and sense of agency that lies somewhere between the two poles of schema and image – it is *an embodied awareness in the moment of action, a* kind of *body image in action* – where one experiences both agency and ownership of virtual entities. This process is a fusion of player's intentions, perceptions, and actions. Once the player stops acting in relation to the game system and pays conscious attention to his or her own embodiment, this effect subsides in favour of a more regular body image. (Gregersen and Grodal 2009, 67)

Reason for this are 'shared circuit'-approaches of two systems of mirror neurons that fire when we either observe an action or when we perform one. Their interaction makes it possible that "we are fundamentally intersubjectively attuned to the movements of other bodies" (68), and that we can experience embodiment effects: "One [system] allows us to feel our own body extending into the virtual environment through a kind of virtual tool-

use, the other activates our own motor system as a response to observed motor patterns." (Gregersen and Grodal 2009, 69)

Rune Klevjer (2012) calls the effects of this extension of the player's body *prosthetic agency*. This idea though, Klevjer argues, "seems to contradict the idea of embodied being or presence" (20) within the game world. Relying on Merleau-Ponty too, he suggests that "avatarial extensions mediate particular kinds of relationships between the body as *subject* and the body as *object*, and between 'bodily space' and 'external space'" (ibid.).[7] According to Merleau-Ponty, we experience the spatial position of our body, its 'here' and 'there', towards its tasks, towards what we can do in a given situation in both physical and symbolic terms. Interface devices we have mastered by training disappear from our perception, expanding our bodily awareness into the game world; "unlike cars and walking sticks and pianos, video games extend our bodies across a material divide, into screen space […;] all that is required is an experience of continuous physicality, of being in extended touch with on-screen images." (Klevjer 2012, 24-25). Note that the experience of physicality needs to be continuous, so a *game over*-event would abruptly end this experience.

As Grodal and Gregersen have pointed out though, for the video games examined here, as for probably all games that make use of the traditional screen-controller-environment, this material divide can only be crossed in one direction,

> the actual embodied experience of being acted upon is still missing: the class of actions which are not exactly actions but rather 'receptions' are evoked audiovisually […] input to the system may be in the tactile modality, but system output serving as input to the player may not. (Gregersen and Grodal 2009, 80)

Being acted upon as a physical, an objective body, thus is not possible to the player. Nevertheless, according to Klevjer's argument, her experience could still be similar to the experience of a slapstick performer on stage, at least if we follow the argument insofar as a combination of signifiers and performance indeed can cause experiences at all. As a *prosthetic proxy* or marionette, Klevjer argues, the avatar not only extends the player's phenomenal body. In addition, it also hides and thereby protects the player, replacing her objective body in the game world. Meanwhile, through prosthetic agency, the player's subjective, experienced body is already there, because "the extended body-subject is […] directed towards what is happening on the screen" (Klevjer 2012, 28). In a process Klevjer calls *proxy embodiment,* a separation of subjective and objective body happens, induced by the medial characteristics of the video game, phenomenologically replacing the body object by the avatar. In this sense, the player actually experiences the pain inflicted on the slapstick avatar *in some way*, though only as her body perception is extended and partially replaced by the virtual entity. Nevertheless, the quality of said pain, its connection to game failure and the results in terms of comedy are still to be discussed.

Assessing pain

Is there any pain involved in slapstick gameplay, and how can it be funny? The third step of Peacock's model for the slapstick perception process discusses the audience's *evaluation of pain*, "the extent to which the viewer assesses

the level of pain involved for the performer" (Peacock 2014, 76). Peacock argues that the pain in performed slapstick actions is experienced by the audience as simultaneously real (to the character's body) and not real (to the performer's body). In a theatrical situation, "assessing the rehearsal necessary and the precautions that are likely to be in place" (77) will strongly contribute to the judgment whether real pain, rehearsed pain or no pain is involved.

As for avatars, the only pain the player could experience she would need to attribute to her embodied proxy; an entity which she *is* at the same time as she *watches* the avatar, experiencing a continuous shifting from a state of control in which she performs, and a state of observation in which she assesses the pain inflicted on the avatar. One time, the avatar is part of the game system, another time, it is part of herself, in struggle for power, interpretable as a comic double act.

Klevjer emphasises that proxy embodiment is

> a trick at the level of the phenomenology of the body, not a trick of fiction. The sense of bodily immersion that is involved in avatar-based play is rooted in the way in which the body is able to intuitively re-direct into screen space a perception of itself as object, which is the perception of itself as part of external space. (Klevjer 2012, 29)

So, for experiencing pain as a slapstick performer, the player would not require the fictional elements that establish a comic frame, such as absurd narrative premises or quasi-social relationships to non-player characters that make social transgression possible in the first place. This notion is important for Peacock's thoughts on accidental and deserved slapstick pain – an issue to which she dedicates two chapters of her book. "Broadly put", she writes, "if the pain appears deserved we are more likely to laugh than if it appears to be unjust" (Peacock 2014, 11). Peacock is right in emphasising examples that are far more complex than this. My point of interest here though is her notion that these examples "raise issues of morality within a resolutely fictional frame" (ibid.). If the fictional frame has a major influence on the amount of laughter in slapstick performances, and if proxy embodiment is no matter of fiction, then the question whether a player is able to laugh at her avatar, while it embodies and experiences failures she performed by herself, must hinge on fictional factors.

Another argument is Lankoski's separation of empathic engagement and goal-related engagement with the avatar, of which the latter is very likely to block the former. Hence empathic engagement is bound to means of narration, its para-social implications on the player's experience would be futile concerning the possibility of virtual pain. Goal-oriented engagement in Lankoski's sense distinguishes *regulating goals* presented to the player by the game, and multiple *subgoals* generated by the player.

> In general, people experience positive affects when moving toward or reaching a goal. Negative emotions are related to situations such as when reaching a current goal is in danger or after having failed to reach the goal. […] When regulating goals are presented as the goals of a PC [player character], the emotions of the PC and the player will be correlated. This does not mean that the emotions or goals of the PC and player are always the same, but that the shared goal will lead similar goal status evaluation (e.g., success to a positive emotion). (Lankoski 2010, 100)

The approach of aligning avatar and player goals dominates the game design of the 2D side-scrolling action adventure *Manual Samuel* (Perfectly Paranormal 2016), one instructive example of what I call single-player slapstick gameplay. The game depicts its avatar Samuel as a clumsy entity in cartoony representation. Its narration mixes fantasy elements, allegorical characters, and contemporary references. A sarcastic, mostly condescending narrator voice is permanently present, depicting Samuel as a "rich and famous brat" spoiled by a luxurious way of life. For his general lack of responsibility and egotism, Sam gets punished first by his girlfriend who breaks his jaw with a bottle of broccoli juice, which provides a first narrative explanation for a peculiar motion control. Then, after a fatal car accident, Samuel arrives in hell. Allegorical Death, frequently practicing skateboard tricks while wearing a hoodie and a baseball cap, offers him a deal to return to life under condition of a physical handicap: "if you really wanna live and biz, you have to do it manually."

This gives occasion to different kinds of challenges that are all grouped around the avatar's motion controls that contradict a common game design paradigm: "Abstract or automate parts of the simulation that *aren't* fun" (Adams 2010, 253). First and most dominantly, walking requires separate input for each avatar leg. If a leg is triggered twice, Samuel does the splits and can only move by slowly bouncing forward in this position. Mastering this kind of movement is challenging in itself. I consider this unconventional implementation of motion control another core of single-player slapstick gameplay, since its cumbersome handling allows for a humorous intertwining of diegetic representation and player performance in the first place. The tension between interface inputs and outputs, between command intentions and avatar movement mirrors the power-play of a comic double act.[8]

Manual Samuel confronts the player with a lot of time-critical challenges. The first type includes recurring *maintenance challenges* for the avatar. The player is required to frequently press buttons to ensure Samuel's breathing in and out, blinking and standing upright. Forgetting these maintenance tasks will lead to a blurred overall vision of the rendered screen image (blinking), Samuel's upper body falling over with an unpleasant cracking sound (standing upright), as well as Samuel's face changing its colour (breathing) and, if the player doesn't react, the avatar collapsing on the floor. The second challenge type includes traditional *reaction challenges*: enemies need to be hit with weapon projectiles or by throwing a non-player character, projectiles and sword attacks need to be blocked or evaded, the player needs to avoid running over elderly people with a car, and she needs to react to a quickly moving interface scale icon to make Samuel drink water or coffee, cough, urinate in the right direction and stammer a plea for mercy towards Satan – all with the right timing. The third time-critical challenge type, a traditional *spatial puzzle*, occurs only once. It involves laboratory steel doors that need to be passed in time, combined with carrying containers of toxic material. Samuel needs to place the material on three usual robots and then, after making it through the steel door, on a bigger robot. Once the player has mastered this puzzle, the game offers a *ludic punch*[9] in form of a tiered puzzle solution, breaking expectation that reaching the boss will end the quest. The bigger robot has two sockets to put the toxic material in, not one. The player needs to solve the puzzle *again*, which makes her the victim of said punch – an example for abusive game design.

Samuel is only capable of expressing pain, everything else about his character traits, his motivation and his social background we learn from the narrator. The only occasion for Samuel to speak is embedded in a time-critical gameplay challenge that makes Samuel stammer separate syllables in case of a successful player performance, or hoarse gibberish if the player fails. The only one who cares for him a little, although with mainly egoistic motivation, is Death. Along with a character visualisation that is reminiscent of overly realistic ugliness in cartoons such as *The Ren And Stimpy Show* (Kricfalusi et al. 2018), it is easy to detach from him as a (para-)social being. This is even easier as the narrator continuously mocks Samuel's efforts to walk, breathe and blink: "Good job, Sam! You are very good at existing!"

On the narrative level, failure is punished by narrator comments, aimed at Samuel as a character, often as a poisonous advice. The quest structure lines up challenge after challenge in a strict manner, the game's progress is highly dominated by the plotline.[10] In ludic terms, punishment upholds the narrative flow. There is no *game over* notice. Instead, the player is simply unable to progress with the level, and consequently the plot line until she succeeds. It is a punishment by repetition, by the necessity to repeat the same action over and over.

Finding this repetition funny would mean for the player to detach her own performance from the events depicted. She would need to laugh at Samuel as a slapstick performer, as a fictional entity. In this way, narrative may be meant to support this laughter by a notion of deservedness, according to Peacock's argument "broadly, we are unlikely to laugh at actual pain unless we feel it is in some way deserved" (Peacock 2014, 66). Yet, as Lankoski argues, the ludic goal-oriented engagement overrules the empathic engagement, turning the mockery into a commentary of the player's performance.

The other important factor to Peacock's argument is for the pain to be *actual*, phenomenologically experienced. As Klevjer argues, Samuel is, aside from being a fictional character, the player's embodied proxy – that is, as long as she can experience Samuel as a prosthetic extension. This experience though is necessarily linked to successful gameplay, to successful usage of the avatar as an instrument. For laughing at Samuel, the player would need to put a lot of effort into the separation of the avatar as an instrument *as well as* a fictional character on the one hand, and the avatar as a representation of herself on the other. If goal-oriented engagement as described by Lankoski will likely dominate empathical engagement, then slapstick in Manual Samuel will most probably be as frustrating an experience to the player as she is attached to the game's regulating goals. If the player laughs at herself for becoming ridiculous in her anger about game failure, as Kirkpatrick describes it, she can do this by detaching her own body-subject, the one which laughs, from her body-object which is being laughed at. But this is true for all games, saying nothing about embodiment. Yet, it may say something about the connection of proxy pain and ludic failure.

Appreciation and Attribution

So, what makes ludic failure in slapstick gameplay funny? The fourth and last step in Peacock's model is *appreciation*

of a slapstick performance by laughter induced by different factors. She develops a taxonomy for different kinds of performed pain along the axes of the intentionality and the manifest cause for comic pain. (see Peacock 2014, 78) While this taxonomy may apply to slapstick among players, in which it is typically clear who inflicts pain on whom, and in which way, discussing player and avatar as central double act entails psychological processes of failure-attribution. In short, the question is: How can single-player slapstick gameplay be funny to the player, even though it systematically hampers her effort to succeed?

In *The Art of Failure*, Jesper Juul (2013) describes a paradox of failure, due to which we "seek out games, although we will likely experience something that we normally avoid" (33). When asking for the cause of her failure, the player, according to attribution theory, will make an attribution in at least one of the following dimensions:

> *Internal vs. external:* attributing failure to the user or to the test (game).
> *Stable vs. unstable:* whether the user believes failure to be consistent or subject to chance or improvement.
> *Global vs. specific:* whether the user attributes failure to general inability or inability in this specific task. (Juul 2013, 51)[11]

For each of those, the first option is more likely to lead to *learned helplessness*, so the worst case of failure attribution in learning would be "*internal* (my fault), *stable* (cannot be changed), and *global* (lack of intelligence in general)" (ibid.). Consequently, Juul recommends that

> players should be told that they can improve (unstable cause) and that their poor performance in no way reflects on their general intelligence (specific cause). The internal/external dimension, however, is a little more complicated. (Juul 2013, 53)

For this last dimension, the notion of mastery as part of Peacock's slapstick definition comes into play. Since slapstick is a matter of mastery and timing, attribution of personal responsibility for any failure is very likely in an action game, or, more generally "a game of skill" (Juul 2013, 74) as opposed to games of chance or labour. "Games of skill most directly express that we are personally flawed" (116). Another factor here can be Lankoski's notion that

> when decision making and motor functions stress a player's cognitive capacity, the affects expressed by the PC [player character] has little or no role in engagement. On the other hand, an affectively loaded expression (e.g., with voice-over narration) in a situation in which the player's focus is on social decision making, or the cognitive load is low, can prompt the focus upon the character and prime empathic engagement with the PC. (Lankoski 2010, 101)

The cumbersome motion control in *Manual Samuel* draws most of the player's attention, and, typical for a game of skill, re-attribution of failure to the game is difficult in itself. Punishment is delivered immediately and can only be overcome in one way. The game systematically avoids for the player to make social decisions, using its means of narrative mostly for mocking the player and thereby avoiding empathic engagement. One could say, by making the avatar subject to ridicule, the game ridicules the player's performance. These factors are fit to foster an

experience of inferiority towards the game for the player, she will most likely feel un-relaxed due to her futile efforts, and making these efforts will feel incongruent to her expectation of her own mastery, to a deservedness of reward, and to a sense of fairness she might expect. That is, as long as she commits to a *lusory attitude* as described by Bernard Suits (1978)[12] *instead* of shifting her cognition to a *playful attitude* that, according to John Morreall (2009), as a disengagement, is a necessary prerequisite for a humour experience.[13] In this, fiction can play an important role.

> We have several ways of taking a playful attitude toward problems rather than reacting with cognitive or practical concern. The most obvious is by fictionalizing them. […] The more obviously fictional the character [in a fictional situation] is, the easier the play mode is to achieve. […] Another factor in comic disengagement is one's role – or better, one's lack of role – in the potentially disturbing situation. […] These and other psychological phenomena disengage us from situations that would otherwise be disturbing. They "aestheticize" problems so that the mental jolt they give us brings pleasure rather than negative emotions. (Morreall 2009, 53)

So, a humorous reaction on failure in slapstick gameplay as described above would mean to fictionalise ludic failure and thereby disengaging from it. This supports Bonello's (2015) notions on estrangement in adventure games[14], and it mirrors the criticism of instrumental play as verbalised by Miguel Sicart (2011).[15] Sicart emphasises the importance of performative, expressive, autotelic processes for the mediality of playing, as he states: "Players don't need the designer - they need a game, an excuse and a frame for play" (ibid.).

One approach to this kind of single-player slapstick game design is *Octodad: Dadliest Catch* (Young Horses, 2014). The game world is crafted in a friendlier tone, mocking its own stereotypical narrative, providing self-ironic non-player characters, and portraying the avatar Octodad as a friendly person surrounded by a loving family. Octodad is an octopus with an elastic body who is positioned in levels full of mischievous banana peels, slippery floors and boxed food pyramids ready to collapse. The core challenge is to move and interact as inconspicuously as possible, concealing the octopus-corporeality to the non-player characters, even to Octodad's own human wife and human children. Though Octodad's corporeality differs more significantly from the player's than Samuel's does, his extremities are grouped as an odd resemblance of human arms and legs. Motion control here is peculiar too, yet the avatar is not likely to break down immediately, and Octodad's elasticity is more reminiscent of an ecstatic dance than of a permanent danger of physical breakdown. Interaction with quest-relevant level objects is very tolerant providing large areas for the extremities to connect and highlighting whenever interaction is possible. On the narrative level, the game denies the protagonist's corporeality by overemphasising gameplay performance, fostering an absurd narrative premise. Failure is presented gradually, by a violet measuring bar that indicates the overall amount of raised suspicion, accompanied by violet ink-dot effects and slurping sounds. If the bar reaches its maximum, the objective has failed and the player needs to restart it from the last save point.

The game punishes transgression of social norms as long as the player operates within the quest structures. Yet, it encourages expressive, autotelic play by offering dedicated virtual spaces and props for it. The game is not

about experiencing pain by proxy embodiment, it is not about helplessness due to loss of ludic control, nor is it completely about teasing the player or estranging her with authoritarian arrangement of ludic means. Instead,

means of narration are what make the game comic, and one could argue that its mechanics may be odd but they are not the type of mechanics that qualify for slapstick gameplay as a ludic genre of comic violence.

Summing up, and referring back to Peacock's slapstick definition, it is safe to say that the games described here contain comic pain and comic violence as central elements of gameplay representation as well as expressions of physical excess. These are emphasised by comical sound effects typically linked to collisions. Situated in stereotypical game worlds where lack of reality is a given, the avatars' corporealities are frequently interfered with by maliciously designed level architecture as integral prerequisite of gameplay challenges. Level props, if they occur at all, serve to make said challenges even harder. As most of the player's virtual performances would injure or kill living entities, these games suggest stunts and acrobatics on a level of signifiers. This is possible due to the lack of reality mentioned above. Playing these games successfully requires physical skill and mastery in terms of handling the input device. Yet, avatar pain is linked to a corporeality that differs from the player's body image. This difference is presented strongly and aggressively in the case of Samuel, as pain is linked to sudden and binary bodily deformation like a broken back, a blue face, and a blurred vision, all directly indicating failure that is morally deserved due to negative character traits, thereby avoiding empathic engagement and enforcing a match of player and avatar goals. For Octodad, odd corporeality does not indicate failure, but a given, a challenge to overcome; failure is delivered gradually, and although it does affect ludic progress, narration frames it as a forgivable setback in the avatar's continuous struggle against transgressing social norms.

Conclusion

In slapstick gameplay, the player fulfils the role of a performer, yet also of a spectator. This goes along with a general affinity of play to subversion and transgression. While in multiplayer environments slapstick gameplay refers to player relations among themselves and towards the procedural rules, in single-player games player and avatar can form a comic double act that is observed and performed by the player.

Slapstick gameplay as a design practice in single-player action games focuses motion control as core challenge due to unusual key mapping and odd depiction of avatar corporeality. As goal-oriented engagement is likely to overrule empathic engagement, the comic appeal strongly depends on the narrative dimension and how punishment for failure is framed by it in a comic way. Traditional slapstick performance strategies like sound effects, absurd narrative premises or malicious objects may support this. When they are utilised as gameplay affordances, especially when touching player performance in terms of e.g. mastery or repetition, designers should consider the resulting game dynamics carefully.

Virtual, physical pain inflicted on the avatar is not experienced physically by the player. Instead, it is substituted, by incongruity of the player's performance with the ludic objectives that, as failure, can be experienced

as frustrating according to the aesthetic means it is indicated by. The player can react to this in different ways that will likely overlap: she can re-adjust her focus of attention to long-term goals (as Melhárt suggests); she can re-attribute the reason for her failure (as Juul suggests); and she can prolong the separation of her body-subject and her body-object (as Klevjer suggests), even though her gameplay flow is disturbed or even interrupted: though having failed as a body-subject, she can laugh at the body-object, the avatar being punished instead of herself. In this way, she is detached from her own failure, upholding a playful attitude.

Building on these observations, further research on the connection of humour and gameplay would imply more thorough analyses of slapstick gameplay as discussed here, aiming for a taxonomy of comic gameplay in single-player games. It should ask if the interruption of gameplay necessarily suspends the separation of body-subject and body-object, and what aesthetic quality failure indication should have to uphold it. It should investigate the means and the degree of aesthetisation necessary for it, the strength of the comic frame, and maybe match it to players' personality traits.

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[1] For more information on cheating as a cultural practice, see Consalvo 2007

[2] As a political practice, abusive game design “uses the productive capacities of play as a power relation to override the instrumental perspectives that deem the game system as central to the play experience, and instead encourages players to focus on the human designer” (Wilson and Sicart 2010, 45)

[3] “However, the moments I have considered are of particular interest precisely because they seem to mobilize the player’s involvement against immersion, turning interaction into inter[upted/ing]action, rather than being a means towards the experience implied by immersion” (Bonello 2015). Estrangement as a concept for analysing video games has been thoroughly discussed by Holger Pötzsch (2017). Examples for usage of estrangement as a result to game failure, though just implicitly, have been described by Shuen-shing Lee (2003). See also the term *emersion*, in contrast to *immersion*, as discussed by Kubiński (2014).

[4] For an overview of the ubiquitous discussion in game studies around Johan Huizinga’s *magic circle*, see Stenros (2012).

[5] Prerequisite for allegiance are *recognition* of how the character’s personality is constructed by means of narration as well as by ludic guiding and limitation (see Lankoski 2010, 102), and by *alignment*, “the process of how events and information unfold within the sequence of play” (105).

[6] “[S]aying that the video game image has the form of a Bergsonian joke entails that it is usually ourselves we are laughing at. The point of the laugh is that in illuminating our excessive attachment to learned routines it makes us aware of the mediatic element in our activity. Its cruel

reminder not to become stuck in character works because it shows us that we have already become object-like, less than human and therefore below the level of meaning-interpretation" (Kirkpatrick 2011, 109).

[7] In this, not only Klevjer's references to the "general phenomenological idea of intentionality, as developed by Edmund Husserl and Martin" (Klevjer 2012, 20) is of interest. Also, Helmuth Plessner's concept of excentric positionality could be worth exploring; for the issue of telepresence in general, as done by Jos de Mul (2003), but also in the context of Plessner's own work *Laughter and Crying* (Plessner 1961; see also Prusak 2006).

[8] About the central role interfaces play to video game mediality, see Jørgensen (2011).

[9] The idea of a ludic punch refers to a notion by game designer Zoe Quinn: "Systems Work As Setups [for ludic jokes]. We can create systems, scenarios, and levels that set expectations for the explicit purpose of subverting them later" (Quinn 2015, 0:07:15); "We can change and introduce multiple systems as we go if we have played out the comedic potential of them as if they were minigames" (Quinn 2015, 0:08:29).

[10] Additionally, the game also a time *attack* mode in which players can compete for the shortest playthrough time of separate levels.

[11] Re-attribution also goes along with Melhárt's argument that hardcore players deal with frustration by temporarily focusing their attention from short-term goals to long-term goals. (see Melhárt 2018)

[12] "To play a game is to attempt to achieve a specific state of affairs [prelusory goal], using only means permitted by rules [lusory means], where the rules prohibit use of more efficient in favour of less efficient means [constitutive rules], and where the rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity [lusory attitude]. […] playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles." (Suits 1978, 41)

[13] "[I]n humor we experience a sudden change of mental state – a cognitive shift, I call it – that would be disturbing under normal conditions, that is, if we took it seriously. Disengaged from ordinary concerns, however, we take it playfully and enjoy it." (Morreall 2009, xii; see also 49-64)

[14] Dead ends, digressions, and turnabouts may provide the opportunity for a "punch-line", or a humorous metafictional parodic turn. Interaction in these moments — which suggest a derailment of seemingly intuitive response or action — manifests itself to the player as inter[rupting]action. […] Such moments of disconnection or interruption, indeed, do not entail an absence of engagement, but rather an avenue towards reconsidering or shifting the means of that engagement. […] Manipulation laid bare takes the form of "play" with the player, and the player's [re]engagement occurs through sharing the joke, and re-considering her own expectations. (Bonello 2015)

[15] „Instrumental play is a take on the concept of instrumental rationality first written by the Frankfort School of critical theory in the 1950s. […] [P]erhaps the most important element that defines instrumental play is how designers adopt the idea of a systems-centered game ontology in order to rationalize not only the design of the game, but also its outcome. […] [An instrumental approach to games] is exclusively guided by the rules, norms and processes embedded in the game system." (Sicart 2011)