Comedy and the Dual Position of the Player

Nele Van de Mosselaer

There are many ways in which digital games can present players with comic situations. They often contain jokes, funny dialogue, and ridiculous situations that provoke laughter. As an interactive experience, however, digital gameplay also presents possibilities for comedy that are not directly caused by the content presented in games, but are rather inherent to the way(s) players experience and relate to this content. In this chapter, I will discuss the comic potential that originates in the way players of digital games take on the dual position of being at once internal to the gameworld via fictional proxy and external to it as the actual person who is playing. I will describe how the comic attitude, as it has been discussed within the philosophy of humour, is intricately related to the dual position that players of digital games take on and how gameplay always entails the possibility of turning players into both a comic object and a laughing subject.

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The Comic in Philosophy

In the *Theaetetus*, Plato describes how the learned Thales of Miletus, while rapt in thoughts of the stars and carefully studying the sky, tumbled into a well. A witty Thracian servant girl, who had seen Thales drop into the hole, laughed heartily, remarking that Thales was so eager to know the things in the sky, that he did not see what was right before his feet (174a). Plato's anecdote already captures what would later be perceived as the very essence of the comic in much of the philosophical discussions on comedy: a distanced, objective, and dispassionate refection on an incongruity. As this description of the comic will be the main focus of this chapter, I will briefly break it down, describing first its incongruous, then its reflective, nature.

In the philosophy of humour, one can find various interpretations of the 'incongruity' or 'contradiction' that forms the object of comedy. For Henri Bergson, comic incongruity consists in "mechanical inelasticity, just where one would expect to find the wide-awake adaptability and the living pliableness of a human being" (Bergson 2013, 5). For Helmuth Plessner, potentially comic incongruities emerge when "[i]nattentiveness, absentmindedness, and inflexibility readily manifest themselves in clumsiness and rigidity of behaviour and thus direct the attention of our fellow men to things which in themselves should be unobtrusive" (Plessner 1970, 82). An important aspect of the comic contradiction that is often emphasised is its unexpectedness and suddenness. As Immanuel Kant writes, laughter arises "from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing" (2012, 133). Søren Kierkegaard, in this line, argues that the inability of a drunk man to walk straight is not as contradictory, and thus not as comic, as the inability of a sober man to keep himself upright, precisely because we may expect a drunk person to act like this (2009, 433). In the case of

Thales, the comic emerges because an esteemed philosopher stupidly falls down a well, much to the surprise of the servant girl. More generally, the comic emerges in contradictions between what was expected and what is experienced. As Arthur Schopenhauer writes, all laughter is caused by the perception of an incongruity, and "laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity" (1909a, 76; see also 1909b, 271).

However, the perception of contradictory situations is not comic per se. A specific attitude must be taken towards incongruities for them to actually be experienced as comic. Within European philosophy, this comic attitude is often connected to human beings' ability to distance themselves

from their surroundings and to dispassionately reflect on them. Bergson writes that comedy emerges when an incongruous situation is approached with emotional detachment: "Step aside, look upon life as a disinterested spectator: many a drama will turn into a comedy" (Bergson 2013, 3). To achieve its effects, the comic "demands something like a momentary anaesthesia of the heart" (Bergson 2013, 3). Kierkegaard also writes that the comic emerges only when a contradiction can be reflected on without any suffering (Kierkegaard 2009, 437). Plessner believes that the experience of the comic is possible by virtue of the human capability to rationally reflect on one's own environment and place within this environment (1970, 91). According to him, we have the power to turn even serious matters into comical ones through a process of "humorous objectification" (Plessner 1970, 141). Similarly, for Sigmund Freud, the humorous attitude involves an elevation above the passions and a trivialisation of serious matters by distancing ourselves from them (Freud 1961). By this token, laughter is understood as a release of energy, which takes place when situations that are at first sight so incongruous as to be irresolvable or even intolerable are dissolved into unseriousness or absurdity, by objective and dispassionate refection.

The comic attitude that constitutes the precondition for laughter is thus characterised by distance and dispassion. These characteristics are typical of a 'third-person' view. Think of the laughing Thracian girl: perceiving Thales' drop from a distance, she probably had more reason to laugh than the philosopher himself, who, although Plato does not explicitly state this, might have hurt himself on his way down. Indeed, adopting the comic attitude towards oneself is not easy, as the objective refection that is necessary for the comic to emerge is hard to assume towards one's own person. Since we are often too preoccupied with ourselves, the comedy of our own activities is less likely to be revealed to us than to a disinterested observer (Plessner 1970, 90).

Nevertheless, most philosophers writing on comedy seem to be convinced that humans have the power to take a comic attitude towards themselves. Charles Baudelaire believes it to be possible for people to assume the role of "a disinterested spectator" towards themselves and laugh at themselves. They can do this by virtue of "the existence of a permanent dualism in the human being— that is, the power of being oneself and someone else at one and the same time", which Baudelaire thinks philosophers and trained comedians are particularly attuned to (Baudelaire 1970, 154; 164). Freud describes the person who takes a humorous attitude

towards themselves as someone who "is treating himself like a child and is at the same time playing the part of a superior adult towards that child" (Freud 1961, 164). Even Bergson, who generally presents laughter as a social expression of one's own superiority over other people, acknowledges the possibility of self-directed laughter, provided that there is a self-division at work: "When the humourist laughs at himself, he is really acting a double part; the self who laughs is indeed conscious, but not the self who is laughed at" (Bergson 2013, 72). In conclusion, the distanced, objective, and dispassionately reflective comic attitude can be aimed towards oneself and one's own actions, on condition that the person in question is able to split themselves into a laughing subject and a comic object.

The Comic in Digital Gameplay

Having discussed philosophical interpretations of the comic and the comic attitude, I want to address the comic potential of digital gameplay. It is important to note that I will not focus on scripted humour in digital games, but rather on humour relating to and regarding the playing of digital games. For this purpose, I will show how the activity of gameplay, and more specifically the position taken by players during play, is not only characterised by potentially comic incongruities, but also by the self-division and possibility of distanced refection on one's own preoccupations that is a precondition for self-directed laughter. I will first describe two incongruities that are inherent to the playing of digital games.

First, digital gameplay has been connected to the phenomenon of immersion: "[a]n impression of a non-mediated participation in a digital world generated by the machine, a sensation of a direct presence, which makes players lose sight of the physical world surrounding them" (Kubiński 2014, 133).1 Similar to Thales, players of digital games can be so caught up in a gameworld that their awareness of the reality that actually surrounds them is to some degree suppressed. And similarly to Thales' inattentive behaviour, immersion in digital gameplay often leads to funny scenes. Losing sight of reality and of the unserious, game-like nature of their own actions, players often behave in unexpected and inflexible ways. Think of how players disproportionately react to gameplay situations, with seemingly excessive terror towards fictional representations of zombies (see Van de Mosselaer 2018), or with violent, controller-breaking ragequits after failing a silly minigame (see also Calleja 2011, 135–146,   for   a

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discussion of players' affective involvement in videogames). Players' presence in and attachment to the gameworld is often accompanied by an air of seriousness surrounding in-game events. Yet, this seriousness is only an imagined one. When the player is scared out of their mind by a vicious zombie attack within a game, for example because they fear the monsters or because they are terrified of losing game progress, their fear will likely seem quite silly to any outsider who is not immersed in the gameworld and sees the player's activity for what it is: that of pressing buttons while staring at pixels on a screen. A first incongruity characterising gameplay is thus that between the apparent seriousness of in-game actions and the ultimate triviality of the player's actual actions.

Second, gameplay typically involves the mechanical inelasticity Bergson regards as the object of comedy. Digital games not only often contain non-player characters that behave according to rigid, inflexible rules (Švelch 2014, 2543–2544), but also impose this kind of behaviour on their players.

Plessner writes that play demands "the readiness to be responsive and to be bound in an imaginary way" (Plessner 1970, 78). Similarly, Suits famously defines the playing of games as "the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles" (1978, 41). When playing a game, players purposefully choose to be bound by artificial constraints determined by the rules of the game while trying to achieve a specified goal. Compare this description of play with Bergson's description of that which makes us comic, as "that which is brought from without, like a ready-made frame into which we are to step. It lends us its own rigidity instead of borrowing from us our flexibility" (Bergson 2013, 7). The second potentially funny incongruity inherent to play, then, is the fact that a rational human being consciously binds themselves to the logic and the limited action possibilities dictated by a game and the system on which it runs. Sometimes, this is taken to the extreme. Think of players obsessively 'grinding': repeating the same game action over and over again to gain in-game currency, loot, or experience points. In Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice (FromSoftware 2019), for example, players are known to spend hours killing a ninja at the top of a fight of stairs in the final section of the game to gain more skill points. Reddit user mumblinmad funnily summarises these players' experiences of the game as "Sekiro: Shadow Runs Up Stairs in a Murderous Loop" (comment to a Reddit thread by ChadJones72 2019). As Bergson would say, the comic in such players' behaviour "came from the fact that the living body became rigid, like a machine" (Bergson 2013, 17).

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The contradictory aspects of gameplay mentioned here can only be deemed funny, however, when they are approached with the comic, third-person attitude described in the previous section. At first sight, digital gameplay, which is often described in terms of immersion, incorporation, and self-involvement, leaves little room to the player for the distance and emotional detachment that are characteristic of the comic attitude. One might assume that a player who is terrified of zombies in a game does not fully register the harmlessness of the fictional creatures and the ultimate unseriousness of their own button-pressing actions. Likewise, the player who is genuinely immersed in their skill point farming seems unlikely to see, and laugh at, the inflexibility and utter ridiculousness of their repetitive actions. Such game actions are funny only from a third-person perspective, which is, as Plessner said, generally hard to take towards ourselves and our own preoccupations.

In digital gameplay, however, laughter directed at one's own activities occurs frequently and easily. This is because gameplay inherently involves the kind of self-division that philosophers deem necessary for taking on a comic, third-person perspective towards the self. Eugen Fink argues that players of games are always characterised by a peculiar 'schizophrenia', as they exist in two spheres simultaneously: they actually exist within the real world, while simultaneously taking on a fictional role within the gameworld (Fink 1968, 23). Such a double personality, Fink writes, is essential to play. When talking about digital gameplay in particular, players' subjectivity is divided into an actual, playing self, who holds the controller, and a virtual, played self, who is often represented by an avatar and moves through the represented gameworld. Gualeni and Vella comment on the relation between the two subjectivities we take on when playing digital games: "[W]e step into our virtual self while continuing to stand with one foot in our actual self. The virtual self, then, represents a departure and an experiment […] with our being: it lets us appear to be otherwise to ourselves" (2020, 107). The self-division inherent to play thus entails the possibility to reflect on the role we play within the virtual world from the external perspective of our actual, playing self. And this, in its turn, makes games potential objects of laughter. By shifting perspective to the external, playing self, the apparent seriousness of a game in

which the played self is involved can be dispelled, revealing terrifying zombies to be mere animated polygons that behave according to rigid, pre-established rules and tragic in-game deaths as quite insignificant losses of time that are caused by one's own failures. The comic potential of gameplay emerges when

player immersion is interrupted and the player takes distance from the role they take on within the gameworld (Bonello Rutter Giappone 2015).

Gameplay thus has an inherent aptitude for self-directed laughter. On the one hand, it is characterised by contradictions such as that between the seriousness of the activities undertaken within the gameworld and the mundaneness of the actual player's actions, and that between the player's actual freedom and their artificial limits within the game. On the other hand, gameplay is characterised by a self-division of players which allows them, at any moment, to take on the perspective of external observer towards their own game activities. The humorous attitude, which Freud defined as the sentiment "Look! here is the world, which seems so dangerous! It is nothing but a game for children—just worth making a jest about!" (1961, 166), is quite easy to achieve towards gameworlds. After all, the experience of gameworlds, albeit often immersive and emotional, always entails the possibility for the actual, playing self to take a step back, and dispassionately look at the gameworld as a (relatively inflexible) digital object and at one's preoccupation with it as unserious and bound to arbitrary rules.

The Player as Laughing Subject and Comic Object

Players have characteristics of both Thales and the Thracian girl. On the one hand, they are immersed in a gameworld that is not in their immediate, egocentric space, almost to the extent of forgetting their actual surroundings. On the other hand, they are able to observe this gameworld and the attempts (or failures) to explore it, from a distance, from a position in the actual, physical world. By virtue of this dual mode of being of the player, the digital game experience has an inherent comic potential. Yet, the realisation of this potential depends on players' awareness of their duality as both a performer and a spectator (see also Hessler 2020). The comic character of gameplay emerges for the player only when their dual status is made explicit and their perspective shifts from played self to that of their actual, playing self.[2] Players are then in the ideal position to laugh at themselves or at their own preoccupation: the very gameplay itself. In this last section of the chapter, I discuss four different ways in which such a shift in perspective can be attained, depending on whether the player's external perspective is brought about unintentionally or intentionally, and if this foregrounding is initiated by the player or caused from within the game or game system.

The Failing Player

The dual position of players might be unintentionally foregrounded because of their own failures to meaningfully interact with a game or game system. Take, for example, the VR pool player who, after carefully examining the balls on the table in front of them, prepares the perfect shot, leans on the table, and promptly falls through it. Such failures in games are typically comic for the distanced observer.

They can also be a cause for laughter for the failing player themselves. After all, these failures not only highlight the contradiction between the fictional activities performed within the gameworld and the actual manipulation of an input device which the player (poorly) undertakes, but often also succeed in jolting the player out of the gameworld and into the position of an actual human being, holding a controller and staring at a screen displaying their own inadequacy. In such cases, the mechanical inelasticity or inadaptability of their ludic self can become comically apparent to the player (see also Kirkpatrick 2011; Hudson 2014).[3]

Of course, not all failures in games are comical to the player who fails. Very often, failure is frustrating, as players, immersed in gameplay, are unable to see the actual unseriousness or painlessness of their own 'suffering'. Yet it is precisely the apparent seriousness of gameplay that makes the comic effect of player failure so effective in the first place. As Plessner writes:

> If it did not hold us fast, did not positively bind us, then we could free ourselves from it without expenditure of energy, and the explosive reaction of laughter would remain incomprehensible. […] [A] state of not being serious makes itself felt only contrary to all expectation. Contrary to all expectation, i.e., with the illusion of seriousness. (Plessner 1970, 141)

It is precisely because we are so caught up in it in the first place that gameplay can at any moment dissolve into laughter. The mental stress caused by a difficult boss fight in *Dark Souls* (FromSoftware 2011) can easily be revealed in its ridiculousness when the anxious player accidentally makes their character stupidly roll into a chasm. Likewise, the tension of an exciting chase in *Assassin's Creed: Unity* (UbiSoft Montreal 2014) can be dispelled into unseriousness when the player fails to wall-run up a building's façade, instead having to watch their character be caught up by a horde of angry guards while uselessly humping a lamppost that is standing in the way. By virtue of the dual position of the player, gameplay entails the

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"possibility of the humorous objectification of our own annihilation" that Plessner believes to be intrinsic to human life in general (1970, 141). In the case of digital games, such objectification is much easier, as our 'own annihilation' is only fictional and often inconsequential. When failing in games, it is thus much easier to become, towards ourselves, that which Plessner calls the "laughing third party—who may even on occasion laugh amid his tears" (1970, 90).

The Failing Game

The dual position of players might also be unintentionally foregrounded from within the game itself. Take, for example, a *Dark Souls* player who suddenly finds their 'played self' surrounded by a group of zombie-like enemies called Hollows and barely manages to strike down the last of these creatures before it can deliver the final blow to them. Before this player can even recover from this stressful encounter, the last Hollow's body falls on top of that of another one, immediately fops upwards again, and, with one leg stuck in a wall, starts grotesquely failing over the corpses of his fallen allies.

In this case, the transformation of a serious, in-game quest into unserious laughing matter is caused by an unintentional malfunction of the game. The game code is here being interpreted in a way that makes sense to the machine, but is obviously wrong and distorted from a human perspective. Not the inelasticity of the player but the mechanical rigidity of the game itself is thus revealed through its deficiencies and in a way that is unexpected to the player (Švelch 2014, 2545). Glitches, bugs, and obvious imperfections in gameworlds can be particularly funny not only because they present unexpected contradictions within the fictional world of the game, but also because they incite the adoption of an external perspective towards this incongruous world. In this regard, Kubiński talks about them as emersive elements: they "reduce the sense of immersion, bring players back to the meatspace" (2014, 134–135). As such, emersive elements expose the player to the very incongruities that are characteristic of digital gameplay: those between immersion and mediation, fiction and reality, and played self and playing self. The player's resulting laughter is one that is possible because of, and often equally aimed at, their own earlier preoccupation with the game and the quests undertaken within it, as if they were serious matters. A potentially history-changing mission in *Assassin's Creed: Unity* is easily rid of its serious nature when the face of

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one's character is suddenly reduced to two dismembered eyeballs and a flying set of grinning teeth (Fig. 1). Such unexpected exposure of a gameworld's mediality and artificiality is incongruous with the player's earlier engagement with it as a realistic, fictional world. As a result, the emersed player's in-game activities no longer seem so serious, and the game's apparent realism gives way to comic inelasticity.

Mischievous and Self-Mocking Players

In the gameplay examples of the previous two sections, the comic, external perspective on gameplay was brought about unintentionally. Sometimes, however, players deliberately evoke this kind of perspective on their own playing of a game, often with comic intentions. In such cases, one's own gameplay can become both the object of comedy and the medium through which the comic is revealed. Very often, players take this kind of humorous attitude towards their own gameplay for the amusement of spectators, by broadcasting their gameplay via YouTube or livestreams.

Fig. 1 A glitch encountered in *Assassin's Creed: Unity*. (Ubisoft Montreal 2014, screenshot by Steam user Retro_Apocalypse)

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First of all, players can expose their own inelasticity through strategies of self-mockery. They do this intentionally by livestreaming or making compilations of their own game failures or foolish behaviours. YouTuber Poiised, for example, made a montage (2015) of his own terrified screams in reaction to fictional Wendigo's popping out of trap doors in Until Dawn (Supermassive Games 2015). Another montage by Fizz (2019) shows players throwing down their controllers in shock, terror, or anger when the Guardian Ape boss in Sekiro initiates another phase after seemingly dying. And YouTuber Markiplier shows himself getting increasingly agitated while playing Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy (Foddy 2017) in a video that is aptly titled "I LITERALLY THROW A CHAIR IN RAGE" (2017). What makes these videos so funny is their very explicit juxtaposition of the players' dual roles, often even showing both the gameplay and footage of the actual player. While the players themselves are often far too caught up in the game, the spectator sees the game situation for what it is and the players' reactions to in-game events as comically disproportionate. Precisely by broadcasting their own experiences, players foreground this duality in gameplay for the external spectator to see and laugh at.

Second, players can expose the mechanical, rigid, and often all-too-obviously coded behaviour of characters and objects in games by choosing not to actually play a game, but play with it. Often, this involves playing the game in a way that is experimental or even transgressive, in the sense that the game was not intended to be played as such (see Aarseth 2007). A typical example of this is The Sims (Maxis 2000), a life-simulator game, in which players often go on a quest to find the most ridiculous ways to kill off the characters whose lives they control. The reason why this can be funny is because of both the revealed, helpless inelasticity of the Sims, who can die if you simply take out the stairs of the pool they are swimming in, and the fact that the player can perceive this 'death' as a mere game mechanic and is emotionally detached from its fictional repercussions in the gameworld. Indeed, players who do this are typically not immersed in the fictional world, but approach this world as a rigid and manipulable piece of technology. As Jaroslav Švelch writes, players, especially those who are technically adept, can turn game engines into "mischief devices that generate funny mishaps" (Švelch

2014, 2546). He describes examples of players deliberately setting off glitches and bugs, causing glaring contradictions between games' (malfunctioning) mechanics and the supposedly 'realistic' fictional world depicted within them. Ben Hudson, in this regard, talks about gameplay as an opportunity for comic   performance,

describing players as comedians who "lay bare the mechanical and inelastic way in which videogames interpret human input" (Hudson 2014, 115). In these cases, gameplay becomes the object of laughter for both the player and potential spectators, giving rise to many comic videos like BLG's (2018) "GTA IV—Swingset of Death" compilations, in which a car is repeatedly launched into the air by driving it into a supposedly ordinary playground swingset, and DangerouslyFunny's (2019) "I Placed 150 Sims Inside a Very Flammable House in the Sims 4".

Self-Mocking Games

Lastly, many games are designed to self-reflexively reveal the mechanical behaviour and the incongruities players tend to get caught up in while playing. Indeed, this self-reflexivity, in the form of metafiction, fourth-wall breaks, or exposure of underlying game conventions, is the basis of many jokes within digital games. *Space Quest 3: The Pirates of Pestulon* (Sierra On-Line 1989), for example, comments on the player's jamming of a massive stepladder into their trouser pocket (Fig. 2), funnily revealing the typical game convention of storing objects in the game inventory that are far too large for the character to carry around. In *Tools of Destruction*, the first PlayStation 3 game in the *Ratchet & Clank* series (Insomniac Games 2007), the recurring character of the Plumber remarks that he almost did not recognise the two main characters "in high definition", making the player aware of the extra-fictional context of the game. And in *Uncharted 4* (Naughty Dog 2016), the player is
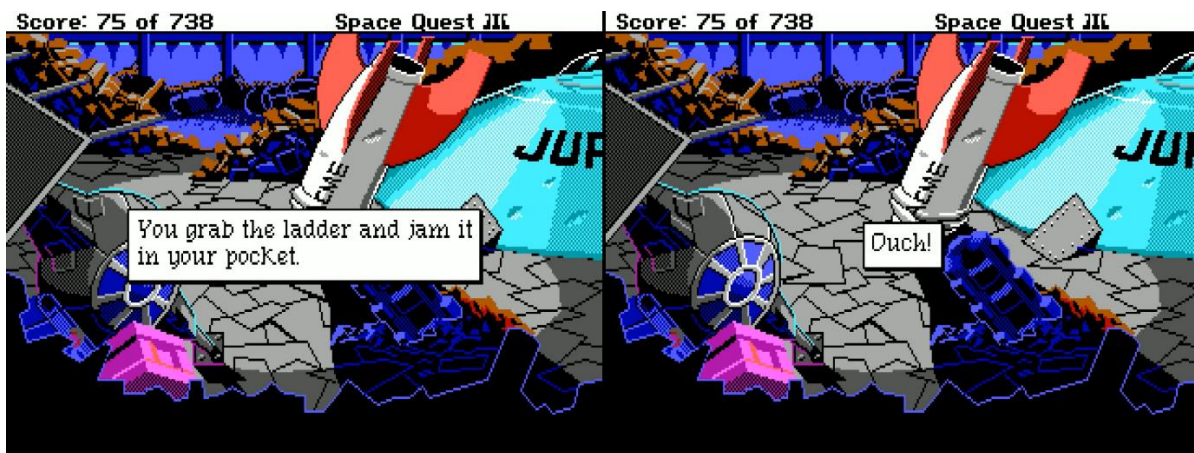

Fig. 2 The text displayed when the player types the command "get ladder" in *Space Quest 3*. (Sierra On-Line 1989)

cheekily awarded an achievement with the name "Ludonarrative Dissonance" when they kill the 1000th enemy in this game, explicitly revealing the incongruity between the player-character Nathan

Drake being a sympathetic hero in the game's narrative and his murderous actions throughout the game's combat sections. All these game situations can have a comic effect because they make the player look at the game's contradictory structure from the distanced position of their emersed, playing self.

In her article on self-reflexivity and humour in adventure games, Krista Bonello Rutter Giappone remarks how these kinds of jokes are often turned back onto the player, who is made aware "of the limits on their control, and of the way their own expectations are shaped by convention. This awareness may also result in an effect of critical self-distancing" (Bonello Rutter Giappone 2015). While playing, players' awareness of the conventions they are following or of the fictionality of the world in which they are immersed is often largely suppressed. When a game then suddenly self-reflexively reveals its own fictionality or the inelasticity of its mechanics, the butt of the joke is thus often not the inelastic or incongruous game itself, but rather the player, who is revealed to have been blindingly following game logic while caught up in play. Fourth-wall breaking events in games represent what is actually going on: the player is merely interacting with a digital object. As such, these events reveal the elaborate joke that is being played on the player during gameplay and that tricks the player into feeling present and engaged in a world that is merely fictional. But this joke can only be revealed to the player when they are, for example through the shock of metafiction, temporarily unbound from their preoccupation with the gameworld. Once again, gameplay then reveals itself as a comic object, and the player, now distanced and able to perceive the game objectively, is simultaneously the one who is laughing and the one who is mocked.

Conclusion

When the esteemed Thales tumbled down a well, too caught up in his thoughts about the sky to see what was right in front of him, a Thracian girl standing nearby observed the scene and laughed. Both Thales' inelastic behaviour and the reflective attitude of the Thracian girl towards him are exemplary of the way the philosophy of humour tends to describe the comic attitude: as an objective and distanced attitude   towards   an

incongruity. Many philosophers noted how such a comic attitude is hard to adopt towards oneself. Self-directed laughter, which consists in the painless and distanced perception of being involved in an incongruity, is possible only when one can perceive one's own endeavours with a degree of detachment and disinterest.

This chapter argued that digital gameplay puts players in the ideal position for such a comic attitude towards the self, as it asks for a self-division between playing self and played self. This self-division is characterised by contradictions between the rule-boundedness and the serious nature of the actions of the played self that is internal to the gameworld, and the freedom and ultimate triviality of the actions of the playing self that is external to this world. Moreover, this self-division allows players to reflect on their in-game actions from a distanced, third-person perspective. Such an external perspective on gameplay is provoked whenever the game has an emersive effect, the player fails to meaningfully interact with the game, or the player uses the game as a mischief device or to broadcast their in-game shenanigans to an audience of non-players. When the unseriousness and inelasticity of the player's in-game actions are revealed in this way, the comic potential of gameplay can be actualised.

Gameplay then creates a comic situation in which the player plays the role of Thales as well as that of the Thracian girl, as both the comic object and the laughing subject.

Such comic situations in digital gameplay show that self-directed laughter, which Freud called the most "primary and important" type of humour (1961, 164), is quite prevalent and might merit more attention than it has up until now received within the philosophy of humour. They also reveal a hitherto relatively underexplored connection between comedy and play. After all, the human ability of self-division appears not only, as Baudelaire argued, to be cultivated primarily by the comic philosopher or the trained comedian, but is also integral to the experience of the player.

Endnotes

1. As Gordon Calleja (2011) observes, there is no consensus within game studies on the specific meaning of 'immersion'. The term has been used both to refer to players being 'absorbed' in their game activities and to refer to players having the feeling of being 'transported' to another world. Calleja himself uses the metaphor of 'incorporation' to account for players' sense of virtual environment habitation and self-involvement in gameworlds. He describes incorporation as "the absorption of a virtual   environment   into

consciousness, yielding a sense of habitation, which is supported by the systemically upheld embodiment of the player in a single location, as represented by the avatar" (2011, 169). I do not here elaborate on the distinctions between immersion, incorporation, absorption, and transportation, as all of these phenomena can arguably lead to a comical disregard for actual surroundings or a laughably disproportionate involvement in the game(world). Note that these specific comic effects are especially likely to occur when playing virtual reality games, as a VR-headset completely removes actual surroundings from the player's field of vision, and the player's sense of embodiment or presence is likely to be higher in VR than when looking at an avatar on a TV-screen (Kilteni et al. 2012).

2. Daniel Vella describes how players might experience a shifting balance between played self and playing self, or between a first- and a third-person perspective on the gameworld. He maintains that both components are essential to play: "[I]t is not—or not primarily—a question of choosing between one or the other: of saying that a particular player's relation to a particular playable figure is either one of self or of other. […] Certainly, on an experiential level, the balance might shift towards the pole of the self, or towards that of the other, in a particular instance of ludic engagement. Nonetheless, both the self-aspect and the other-aspect are integral components of the relation" (Vella 2015, 233).

3. Some games are specifically designed to elicit this effect by making the game's controls deliberately awkward or by making in-game failure look intentionally ridiculous, like *QWOP* (Foddy 2008), *OctoDad* (Young Horses 2010), and *Biped* (NExT Studios 2020). Ian Bryce Jones describes these so-called fumblecore games as comedic brawls "that take place within the confines of one (virtual) body" (2016, 89). They create a measure of distance between players and their avatars, so that "players begin to appreciate these failing masses of ragdoll limbs not as surrogates but as aesthetic objects in their own right" (2016, 91). Jones also observes that these games have inspired "thousands of gamers to upload footage of their keyboardflinging bloody failures for the amusement of others" (2016, 88), making

them perfect candidates for creating the self-mocking content described in section "Mischievous and Self-Mocking Players" of this chapter. For more on *OctoDad* and fumblecore, see Rob Gallagher's chapter in this volume, "That Joke isn't Funny Anymore (Or Is It?): On Hitman and Gamer Humour(lessness)".

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