The Rise and Fall
of Social Games Parodies

By Gabrielle Trépanier-Jobin

Definition of genre parody

"Repetition [of genre conventions] with ironic critical distance, marking difference rather than similarity" with the help of techniques such as:

- reiteration
- inversion
- misdirection
- literalization
- extraneous inclusion
- exaggeration

(inspired by Hutcheon, 1985: xii and Harries, 2000)

Clarifications

- Parody is not a genre, but a discursive form or discursive practice (Bakhtin, 1978)

- Satires target social practices while parodies target discourses (Rose, 1993)

- Parodies do not necessarily have to be comical (Hutcheon, 1995)

Parodies'
modus operandi

Balance between:

- Repetition => helps to identify the parody's target

- Difference => helps to infer the parodic intent

(Hutcheon, 1985 : 77; Harries, 2000 : 34)

Parodies'
modus operandi

Most efficient parody techniques
Exaggeration & literalization

Repetition & Difference

Success of parodic communication

Relies on:

1. a good balance between repetition and difference

2. the presence of interpretative clues in the text and paratext

Traditional genres

Based on the similarity of :

- semantic elements (themes, iconography, etc.)

- syntactic elements (narrative structure, etc.)

- stylistic elements (aesthetic, techniques, etc.)

(Altman, 1999)

Video game genres

Based on the similarity of the gameplay:

- the challenges that the player has to overcome

- the action that needs to be performed

- the skills that are required

(Apperley, 2006 ; Arsenault, 2010; Wolf, 2001)

Video game genre parodies

Do not primarily target the semantic, syntactic or stylistic elements of a game genre

but

Target the gameplay of a game genre and the gaming experience that it favours

Social games (à la Farmville)

- Involve to perform simple actions repeatedly to gain points, virtual items, skills, or to level up

- Require limited effort from the player

- Rely on positive reinforcement: each small action is rewarded

- Revolve around different themes and iconography

- Are targeted to casual players and can mostly be found on the social network *Facebook*

- Often involve monetization techniques

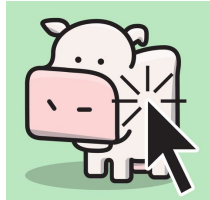## Farmville (Zynga, 2009)

Cow Clicker (Bogost, 2010)

Cow Clicker
The creator's intention

Satire [parody] that criticizes four aspects of social games :

1. Enframing
2. Compulsion
3. Optionalism
4. Destroyed time

(Bogost, "Cow Clicker: The Making of Obsession")

Cow Clicker
(Bogost, 2010)

Cow Clicker
(Bogost, 2010)

Cow Clicker
(Bogost, 2010)

Cow Clicker
(Bogost, 2010)

Cost: 100 000 Mooney

Cow Clicker's parody techniques

	Help to identify the target	Help to understand the parodic intent
Exaggeration of the waiting time between each click and the number of clicks necessary to get an item	✓	✓
Literalization of the clicking mechanic through the use of the expression "cow clicks"	✓	✓
Reiteration of social games' stylistic elements	✓	
Reiteration of social games' monetization techniques	✓	
Exaggeration of the cost for buying some items		✓

Cow Clicker's paratexts

	Help to identify the target	Help to understand the parodic intent
The title is a clear reference to social games like Farmville and literalizes the mechanic of clicking	✓	✓
No hint in the instructions of the game		

The reception of Cow Clicker

Many players liked the game for its aesthetic and rewards:

"Cow Clicker was **perversely enjoyable**. The cartoon cow was **cute**, with a boxy nose and nonplussed expression. After every click, it emitted a **satisfying moo**. The game may have been dumb and even mean. But it was also, for some reason that resisted easy explanation, kind of **appealing**"

– Jason Tanz, *Wired*

The reception of Cow Clicker

Some players liked the game for its social aspect:

"This app is absolutely lovely. It isn't as time consuming as other apps and you can still **engage your friend** into doing something silly together"

– Atrawog

The reception of Cow Clicker

Some players liked the game for the creativity it allows:

"Cow clicker may have been intended as satire, but personally I quite enjoy it. For me it is kind of like a **collaborative writing exercise**. My friends and I routinely share our clicks and attach a **cow-related semi-philosophical quote** or other twist on a popular meme. [...] You could say that we have **invented our own meta-game** around Cow Clicker"

– Malcom Ryan

The reception of Cow Clicker

Some players felt compelled by the game despite understanding its parodic intent:

"Playing Cow Clicker reminds me of how large and bovine I am becoming, sitting at the computer — yet the game compels me to keep at it! It **sends the wrong message**, Ian, the wrong message!"

– Alexandra Holloway

The reception of Cow Clicker

Succeeds at:
- becoming a commercial hit (against all odds)
- creating discussions about social games

Fails at:
- convincing players that they should not play the game
- prove that social games cannot generate meaningful gaming experiences

Commentary on Cow Clicker

"Ian has somewhat failed in his mission, allowing players to invent their own meta-games which they actually enjoy, at no profit to himself"

– AnotherJason

" This is true"

– Ian Bogost

Cowpocalypse Now (Bogost, 2011)

Commentary on Cow Clicker

"In some sense, this is the truest version of Cow Clicker—the pure, cold game mechanic without any ornamentation"

– Jason Tanz, *Wired*

Commentary on Cow Clicker

"I think it would be really interesting if you engaged your "clients" as a real individual instead of a shadowy developer or company. You could shut down the game and **send a communique to the users explaining the project** as seen by you, what were your goals and expectations, and how you feel about it now, etc."

– Bruno

A.V.G.M.
(McMillen and Glaiel, 2009)

A.V.G.M.'s parody techniques

	Help to identify the target	Help to understand the parodic intent
Exaggeration of the clicking mechanic	✓	✓
Literalization through the image of the switch	✓	✓
Transposition of the mechanic into an indie style		✓
Extraneous inclusion of sexual artefacts		✓
Decontextualisation (publication of the game on Kongregate, Newgrounds, etc.)		✓

A.V.G.M.'s paratexts

	Help to identify the target	Help to understand the parodic intent
Mysterious title		✓
Instructions: "experimental game", "winner for innovation", "unlock the game real title"		✓
Credit at the end of the game reveal the meanging of the title "Absusive Video Game Manipulation" (after 10 212 clicks)	✓	✓

A.V.G.M.'s Reception

The majory of players did not understand the concept:

"OMG whats wrong with this? This must be called a "game"? Sorry, **I don't understand the "concept",** my mouse will explode before "win" something here...1/5"

– Flypool

A.V.G.M.'s Reception

Many players gave up because it is too boring and suffering:

" 641 clicks and my screen is crowded with semi-related items. I have **no desire to continue**. I award this game 1/5 points, and may God have mercy on your soul"
– Deterodae

"this is fn ridiculous. im not gonna **waste my time** anymore after 3k clicks its gonna take to long. **shorten this** and maybe ppl would actually care to finish!!!"
– Loingelf

A.V.G.M.'s Reception

The game's sexual artefacts diverted attention from the message for many players:

"*randomly clicks around the game* Boring... *Flicks lights on and off and **naked woman** appears* Yeah I think i'm gonna stay"– White_Face

"EWWWWWWWWWWWWWW........NAKED LADY WITH REALLY BIG **BOOBS**" – Ugmethesecond

"it need about 10211 clicks to finish, weird game, and naked chick **color to naked man** :(" – Dcshuzon

A.V.G.M.'s Reception

Some players liked the game for its items or challenge:

"I have a noose, and a skeleton's bones, spider, voodoo doll, dead bird, computer, drapes, cross, picture frame, hand cleanser, tissues, WHAT THE F-?! I **love the game**!"
–Landflow124

" Holy hell... i dont even really care that at the end is just a "you wasted your time" notice, because the **glory of finally finishing** was well worth it. over 10,000 clicks jesus christ" – MuphinnMix

A.V.G.M.'s Reception

Some players developed strategies to beat the game faster:

"for those who want to finish this fast, use **2 hands to click** [...]alternately tap like this: right index, left index, right index, left middle. and repeat" – loingelf

"God bless **auto clickers**" – NicolasVerdi

A.V.G.M.'s Reception

A minority of players appreciated the irony of the game:

"umm wow!! i love how it makes you want to click it. ... although it does say more about the people that enjoy then it does about self..."

– PosFeedBackCycle

A.V.G.M.'s Reception

Some players did not understand the concept despite finishing the game:

"10,212 clicks.. no autoclicker, just the old-fashioned way. Won. No "new title intro", no "puzzle piece", **just a "haha look at how much time you wasted" messag**e, and a stick figure w/ a penis. what a letdown. I would have 5/5'd, but I'm 1/5'ing instead. No lulz were had."

– Puppy528

A.V.G.M.'s Reception

The players who knew the creator or inquired about the game better understood it:

"Read Edmund's blog! Before you play it!! Seriously!!! – EPR89

"Remember who the creator of the game is. If you've ever played any of edmund's previous games, then you'd understand a lot of what goes on in his games. IOW, weirdness" – TheoSoft

The success and failures of A.V.G.M.

Succeeds at:
- convincing players that they should not play the game
- prove that social games cannot generate meaningful gaming experiences

Fails at:
- becoming a commercial hit
- creating discussions around social games

Progress Wars

Progress Wars' parody techniques

	Help to identify the target	Help to understand the parodic intent
Reiteration of social games' interface elements	✓	
Exaggeration of their size and the space they occupy coupled to the removal of other elements	✓	✓
Exaggeration of the clicking mechanic through time compression	✓	✓
Decontextualisation (independant website)		✓

Progress Wars' paratexts

	Help to identify the target	Help to understand the parodic intent
The title reminds those of social games like "Mafia Wars", while literalizing the idea of progression	✓	✓
The parodic intent is stated at the bottom of the game: "Progress Wars is a parody"		✓

The rise of social games parodies

They seemed to be a good way to produce metadiscourses on social games to:

- criticize their simplistic mechanics

- denounce their monetization techniques

- encourage social games' creators to innovate

The rise of social games parodies

With the help of a procedural rhetoric (Bogost, 2007) based on the exaggeration of simplistic and repetitive game mechanics, they:

- draw the attention of the players on these mechanics

- mock the players who collect virtual items or click compulsively to satisfy their curiosity

- act as "points of resistance" (Foucault) within the genre system

Concerns raised by social game parodies

Parodies reduce social games to their clicking mechanic while ignoring what many people consider to be their essence (design possibilities and escape from daily life)

Commentary on Cow Clicker

"[...] FarmVille is **FUN because you get to have a FARM.** People — every day normal regular people — actually LIKE the idea of having a farm. It's part of our agrarian heritage. It's comforting. **It's heartwarming**. It's a nice little dream. [...] What you think of as an odious compulsion to return, players think of as a respite, **a brief retreat from the rest of their day** [...]"

– JM

Concerns raised by social game parodies

- Game genre parodies do not only target formal elements, but also the players who actualize their mechanics and their underlying gaming culture

- Consequentially, players feel more directly targeted by these parodies

The fall of
social game parodies

Social game parodies proliferated and contributed to the consolidation of a genre called incremental game, idle game, clicker or clicking game
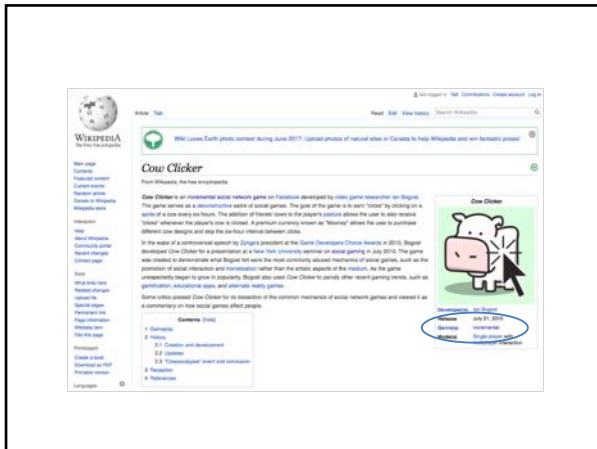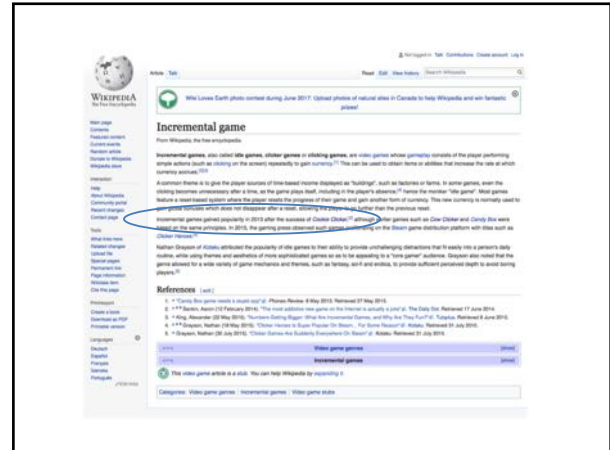
The fall of
social game parodies

- The labelling of social games parodies as clicking games shows that every act of resistance is eventually normalized, integrated into the system, and loses its subversive power

- Resisting to norms and conventions through their rearticulation is an ongoing process (Foucault, 2001)

- And now, how can we parody clicking games whose mechanics are already simplified to the extreme?

Bibliography

Apperley, Thomas. 2006. « Genre and game studies: Toward a critical approach to video game genres », *Simulation Gaming*, no 37 (mars), p.6-23.

Altman, Rick. 1999. *Film Genre*. Londres : Bristish Film Institute.

Arsenault, Dominic. 2010. « Introduction à la pragmatique des effets génériques : l'horreur dans tous ses états ». *Loading...* Vol 4, no 6.

Bakhtine, Mikhail. 1978. *Esthétique et théorie du roman*. Paris : Éditions Gallimard.

Bogost, Ian. 2016. *Play Anything*. New York. Basic Books.

Bogost, Ian. 2007. *Persuasive Games : The Expressive Power of Videogames*. Cambridge : The MIT Press.

Foucault, Michel. 2001. *Dits et écrits I*. Paris : Éditions Gallimard.

Harries, Dan. 2000. *Film Parody*. British Film Institute.

Hutcheon, Linda. 1985. *A Theory of Parody. The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*. Urbana et Chigago : University of Illinois Press.

Tanz, Jason. 2011. "The Curse of *Cow Clicker*: how a cheeky satire became a videogame hit". *Wired*. https://www.wired.com/2011/12/ff_cowclicker/

Rose, Margaret A. 1993. *Parody : Ancient, Modern, and Post-modern*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.

Wolf, Mark. 2001. « Genre and the Video Game ». Chap in *The Medium of the Video Game*, Austin : University of Texas Press, p.113-134.