

Satire at Play

A Game Studies Approach to Satire

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The persuasive potential of games and their use in political propaganda and raising social awareness are well-established components of the game studies discourse, and the literature around persuasive games highlights satire among the expressive tones of several games. Despite this, what persuasive games' literature still lacks is a complete and stand-alone defining account of satire in games, which could be useful in analyzing both analog and digital games used for satirical purposes.

Our intention with this paper is to frame satire within the field of game studies through notions and perspectives borrowed from other media studies and narratology. In that pursuit, we initially give an operational definition of satire focusing on concepts such as entertainment, critique, and rhetoric. Subsequently, we explore how this definition relates to, and interacts with, key concepts in game studies, such as procedural rhetoric, and the implied designer.

Additional Key Words and Phrases: Satire, Procedural rhetoric, Persuasive games, Implied designer

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1 INTRODUCTION

The persuasive potential of games has become a well-established component of the game studies discourse. Examples of the scholarly interest in games' persuasiveness include Ian Bogost's work on procedural rhetoric [4], the evaluation and analysis of newsgames [6, 28], games with political intents, and the debate around the propagandistic use or subtle propagandist elements of games [34]. Despite this, very little has been said of the ways in which interactive media in general, and games in particular, can be expressly satirical (with a few exceptions – see, for example, [17, 21, 25, 33]). To tackle this academic gap, the first necessary step is to articulate what we mean by satire, and to understand how satire can be framed in a way that is useful for game studies. As novel ways to express satire, games help us frame it beyond the scholarly fields in which it has been predominantly studied so far.¹

¹Satire has of course been a topic for literary scholars [22], but also for scholars researching caricature (e.g. Chen K.W., Phiddian R., Stewart R. 2017 [11], Bonello Rutter Giappone et al. 2013 [1]), drama (e.g. Yearling 2016 [35]), TV (e.g. Carpenter 2000 [10]), and journalism (e.g. Lockyer 2006 [24]). However, it has so far received little attention in relation to games, and this is what this paper seeks to address.

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The first half of the paper will be devoted to a definition of satire based on critical intent and entertaining purpose, drawing upon (and extending/adapting) prior definitions from other scholarly fields. We then move towards a game studies approach, dealing with game-specific concepts such as procedurality and the implied designer.

2 WHAT IS SATIRE? OPERATIONAL DEFINITION AND FRAMEWORK

2.1 A first attempt to define satire

Even though satire is commonly understood as an artistic form, or genre, it is worth noting that the term ‘satire’ is indeed ‘protean’, and satire constitutes “one of the most heavily worked literary designations and one of the most imprecise” [16]. Its essential features are disputed [13], and the consensus has been that a unifying definition of satire is elusive: “no strict definition can encompass the complexity of a word that signifies, on one hand, a kind of literature [...] and, on the other, a mocking spirit or tone that manifests itself in many literary genres but can also enter into almost any kind of human communication” [16]. It is due to this that scholars often choose to define satire using a “family-resemblance cluster of nonessential features” [12, 385]. Additionally, ‘satirical discourses’ are “heterogeneous in their semiotic components”: they blend different styles and emotional tones and are expressed through a broad range of media, with different and even diverging critical intentions, commentary, or positions [17]. Satire is also, importantly, transideological [19, 30] – that is, it could be used equally for conservatively corrective as well as critical ends. As a result, satire has been a notion that is difficult to define, contain, or even simply grasp.

We shall nonetheless try to construct an operational definition of satire. To this end, we shall introduce some operational notions such as ‘critique’, ‘entertainment’, and ‘rhetoric’. We will then attempt to frame satire in a way that facilitates recognition and analysis of satire in games.

In broad terms, satire is perceived as a form of fiction “in which human or individual vices, follies, abuses, or shortcomings are held up to censure by means of ridicule, derision, burlesque, irony, parody, caricature, or other methods” [16]. Whether considered as genre or mode, as a tone or attitude [26], satire is a ‘narrative form’, a “means for and of representation” [32] that usually makes use of several other rhetorical devices and satiric strategies, which could include irony, humor, parody, and wit, with critical intent. We conceive of satire as a form of fiction that has both entertaining and critical aspirations: “the aim of satire is, indeed, often as much to instruct and reform as to entertain” (Jones 1982). As outlined by Declercq, entertainment and critique are purposes that necessarily interact in satire [14, 325].

We will now, therefore, briefly delve into two main interlinked features: its (perceived) critical intent, and its entertaining purpose.

2.2 Defining satire: (perceived) critical intent and entertaining purpose

As Elliot claims, satire – as opposed to other comic genres/modes – uses wit to expose its targets to criticism rather than simply to be funny and audience-humoring. Since its literary origins, satire has had what one may identify as a ‘reforming intent’, focused on a precise and clearly stated question, process, or state of affairs [16]. We find it productive to align with Dieter Declercq (2018a) and claim that a critical thrust, in its interaction with entertainment, is a necessary condition for something to be considered satire, or for a narrative to be satirical. In this case the critical thrust or

‘critique’ is defined as “a committed moral opposition against a target, sustained by an analysis of that target’s perceived [...] wrongness” [14, 323].²

Satire is often seen as “a mode of challenging accepted notions by making them seem ridiculous” [8, 252]: it strives to provide “valuable social and political comment” [23]. At the same time, past and present satirical discourses have often had a moral purpose [23]. In terms of tone, there is a “satiric scale” (Horatian-to-Juvenalian: gentle-to-harsh) though the aim is always “to hurt” a target [24, 766]. It has thus been contrasted with the ‘ludic’ and playful [18, 27-29]. We witness a turn towards the ‘playful’ with the postmodern paradigm-shift in criticism and cultural production, where the accompanying ‘rhetoric’ tended to be re-cast as playing with discursive structures [15]. ‘Play’ as “root metaphor” of the postmodern [15, 720] blurs the boundaries between the passive spectator and the text, making the spectators players – “participants in the game” [15, 719].

Despite the emphasis placed on participatory play by postmodernism, playfulness in satire has sometimes been seen as merely a question of tone, a sugarcoating to partially mask the bitterness and make it more palatable [19, 51]. What we are attempting here is to bring play back into the foreground, reconnecting the ludic with critical intent, through the notion of rhetoric. We understand rhetoric to be an effective and persuasive expression, or discourse, aimed at informing, persuading, or motivating particular audiences in specific situations [4].

Entertainment is also vital to satire. We agree with Declercq’s aesthetic definition of entertainment as a classification “which applies to artifacts and performances principally designed to deliver [...] fun and divertive aesthetic experiences” [14, 323], which absorb and redirect one’s attention from the seriousness of everyday life.³ Pursued for fun, entertainment is both joyful and enjoyable [14]: Zillman and Byrant define it as “any activity designed to delight and, to a smaller degree, enlighten through the exhibition of the fortunes or misfortunes of others, but also through the display of special skills by other and/or self” [36, 438]. Partly in agreement with Bates and Ferri, we define entertainment on the grounds of a few key features, namely:

- the interaction between an audience and a text (broadly defined), and requiring:
 - the presence of a communicative external stimulus of some sort;
 - the presence of an audience, even if composed of only one person;
- the principal goal of this communication being pleasure [3, 11-15].

As for the positioning of the audience in relation to the text, Bates and Ferri outline that “entertainment [is] an experience of spectatorship more than participation” [3, 14]. This criterion of audience passivity causes them to exclude leisure activities such as doing sport, participating in a challenge of some sort, or telling (and not listening to) a tale [3]. They acknowledge that “passivity is the most problematic of [their] criteria, and perhaps the most likely to become outdated, (as often) the line between spectator and participant grows blurry” [3]: we accordingly update their definition to one more inclusive and better suited to our operational purposes. The reasons for this will become clear in what follows.

²Declercq [13] however, also cautions against taking satire too seriously as a form of critique, since it is often necessarily reductive (partly due to the pressures to be entertaining, and to the tendency towards over-simplification for rhetorical effect). He calls, instead, for satire to be approached with “careful cognitivism”, and taken as a prompt for more nuanced critical thinking, rather than accepted as exhaustive critique.

³However, satire also assumes that through this means, it can be redirected back at the seriousness of everyday life, as we will discuss later.

3 SATIRICAL GAMES

3.1 Towards a game studies approach to satire

Although the first narrow definition of the term ‘satire’ given by the Roman rhetorician and educator Quintilian was strictly literary, today it is self-evident that satire is, or at least could be, everywhere [16]. Satire has progressively fragmented into a variety of expressions and practices. Among the various forms of expression in which we can find something we can identify (using the operational definition above) as ‘satirical’, one can count songs, plays, sermons, paintings, television programs, movies, cartoons, and of course “a number of other areas of human activity as well” [16].

We would claim that as long as a discourse, or narrative, necessarily sets out to entertain and critique some state of affairs via the use of wit, derision, irony, parody, and so on, it could be understood as satirical (also see [14]).

In the following sections of this paper, we discuss how satire could be expressed through a participatory activity such as playing a game. We could read satirical performances as precursors of this: satire has a long tradition in performance, from Aristophanes through Molière, to Brecht and Boal to pick just a handful of reference points (Brecht and Boal in particular eliciting the audience’s participation). Stand-up comedians such as Lenny Bruce and Stewart Lee also deliver hard-hitting critique through comedy (as entertainment) (see [13, 14] on Bruce).

3.2 Playing Satire

The focus of Persuasive Games [4] is the “expressive power of videogames”. It connects two key concepts, of which one concerns expression and persuasion, i.e. rhetoric, and the other the specificity of digital games, i.e. procedurality [4, 3-11]. We shall at first follow Bogost’s steps in the attempt to show how (both digital and analog)⁴ games could be satirical.

Bogost uses Kenneth Burke’s definition of rhetoric as the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols (i.e., for Bogost and Burke, human beings) (see Burke [9], in [4, 20-21]). Understanding human beings as consumers and producers of symbolic systems, Burke widens rhetoric to include nonverbal domains.

Bogost defines procedurality as “a way of creating, explaining, or understanding processes” [4, 3]. Procedures “maintain the edges of certain situations” [4, 6] (bureaucracy for example), and stimulate, with the imposition of different kinds of constraints, the creation of new expressions. In games, procedures are expressed and sustained by rules, while cases of this kind of novel expression could be found in emergent or subversive play.

Procedural rhetoric is hence defined by Bogost as “the practice of using processes persuasively”, i.e. “authoring arguments through processes” [4, 3]. What games do procedurally, and therefore what allows them to tell stories, to persuade, and to mount statements, is comparable to what other rhetorical devices do in the attempt to communicate to and persuade their audiences.

The idea that satire requires some degree of participation, and even the analogy with a game, is not new; Guillhamet tells us:

⁴As Stercewski points out, Bogost’s preferred focus is on the computational procedurality of digital games; however, Bogost himself doesn’t seem to exclude board games: Stercewski argues from this that board games can also be analyzed in terms of processes [29, 73]. We extend our observations to analog games on this basis.

If readers listen for the satirist's own voice, they are less likely to miss it. Reading a satire is the same delicate act of balancing generic clues that is required in the study of nearly all literature [...] They must know, to use Eliot's phrase, "the rules of the game" [22, 136].⁵

If we assume that procedural rhetoric plays an important role in the satirical effect of a game, we also need to consider other factors at play. The most crucial of these is the players' appropriation of that rhetoric while playing. In "Against Procedurality", Sicart outlines that play does not include only the logic of the game, i.e. rules, procedures, and performance of play according to (or counter to) rules, and procedures; instead, "it also includes the values of the player. Her politics. Her body. Her social being. Play is a part of her expression, guided through rules, but still free, productive, creative" [22, 136]. According to Sicart, one of the defining features of play is precisely its openness, which allows the player freedom to express and explore values, messages, and so on. This reading is both important in contradicting the 'designer-dominant' perspective of proceduralism, and in qualifying the importance of rules: rules structure and facilitate play, but they do not determine it - "they are still subject to the very act of play (that,) again, is an act of appropriation of the game by players" (ibid.).

Moreover, satire's tone and target can vary in terms of subtlety, and the greater the subtlety, the more we "as players" need to "interpret the clues, think for ourselves, and co-create the stories" [33]. If games can be satirical due to their procedural rhetoric, then similarly their satire can exist only during the players' appropriation of that rhetoric while playing.

Another clarification that is specific to satirical play concerns what Van de Mosselaer and Gualeni call the 'implied designer' of a game, which they define as the conceptualization of a designer that the player constructs on the basis of their dynamic interpretation of the [game experience]. To this inferred figure, the player ascribes all those intentions that they think lie at the basis of the creation of the [game experience] in question [31, 3].

It is due to a divergence between the intentions of the actual designer and those of the implied, inferred one that Ian Bogost's *Cow Clicker* [5] – a self-reflexive game intended as satirical, meant to criticize social media games – has sometimes been interpreted and appropriated (by players) as a sincere social media game, and, thus, not critically [30].

This kind of implied authorship also resonates with Elliott's definition of indirect satire. According to Elliott, we have direct satire when a narrator speaks directly to his audience, and indirect satire when the author's intent is realized within the narrative, not made explicit [16]. It is therefore evident that when satirical game designers do not make manifest their intentions for the game, then is up to the player to infer their tone, critique, and claims through play.

The notion of implied designer also helps us to understand how satire is ultimately context-relative [20]. To understand every satirical detail of the digital game *Call of Salveenee* [2],⁶ for example, one has to know both Italian politicians and their political context, and has to assume that the designer of the game also knows those same politicians, i.e. one has to infer a designer who is willingly making fun of that specific actual state of affairs. The features of the text provide clues and indications for such an inference, which the situated player/reader/viewer can activate, recognizing that the author (or designer) is using that mediated content to satirize a well-known state of affairs.

4 CONCLUSION

As we saw with *Cow Clicker* [5], the relationship between entertainment and perceived critical intent, while productive of satire, can also be one of tension, with one threatening to overwhelm the other. From the design perspective,

⁵See also Booth [7, 120], on the possibilities of missing satire, and on the framing factors that contribute to detecting it at work, such as awareness of context.

⁶In this case, the game is quite clear in highlighting the dominant traits of said politicians, and thus effectively communicates something about its context.

Schellekens et al. 2020 suggest that one way of ensuring that critique is not overshadowed by entertainment is to bring the designers' intention into the foreground, to reduce the possible variations that could occur in the process of their inference. Yet, interpretation and player-participation remain crucial to the success of satire. We are convinced that this potential conflict could be explored in further research on satirical games.

Our analysis revealed that Declercq's identification of the essential characteristics of satire, namely (perceived) critical intent and entertaining purpose, as well as ment and their interaction between them, can also be applied to the interactive medium of games. This approach moreover serves as a fruitful basis for analytical frameworks, as demonstrated in *Satirical Game Design: The case of the Boardgame Construction BOOM!* [27].

The concepts of procedural rhetoric and the implied designer have further allowed us to move towards a game studies approach to satire. This first definition may serve as a starting point for further discussion around themes such as the in-game relationship between 'entertainment' and 'critique', or degree of player-participation and interpretation in perceiving satire through specific elements of the game experience, from both theoretical and design perspectives.

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