

SCMS Conference 2014  
VIDEO GAMES AND COMEDY Panel

Proposal

## Comedic affordances in digital game soundscapes

*Costantino Oliva*  
Institute of Digital Games  
University of Malta  
[costantino.oliva@um.edu.mt](mailto:costantino.oliva@um.edu.mt)

Among audiovisual media, the peculiar aspect of digital games is in the nontrivial effort required from the user to traverse them (Aarseth, 1997). Not everything is prescript in a linear fashion, allowing a certain amount of juxtapositions and discrepancies among audiovisual elements, narrative situations, and semiotic meanings. Those can afford the perception of comedic situations. The *Half-Life 2* community couldn't help but notice the fact that even if they were armed with explosives, they couldn't open a banal wooden door that was just not designed to be opened.

In classic Pirandello's comedy theory, the humorist experiences an awareness of the opposites (Bassanese, 1997): the comical effect is triggered by the perception of a contradiction.

Chion explains that, in audiovisual media, whenever visual and audio are played simultaneously, the viewer/listener makes sense of the two streams by *synchresis*: "the spontaneous and irresistible weld produced between a particular auditory phenomenon and visual phenomenon when they occur at the same time" (Chion, 1994). The two elements, audio and video, can be used in way that produces the awareness of the opposites described by Pirandello. An example of that is found in the practice of *mickeymousing*, which consists in associating an unexpected musical figure to an on screen action. Examples are found in classic cartoons and digital games alike: in *Super Mario Bros.*, "Mario's "jump" is accompanied by an ascending chromatic glissando" (Whalen, 2004).

How this interacts with the previously mentioned comedic affordances found in digital games? Digital games can be described as compound media containers; specifically, their audio content consists of different pre-composed sounds. This sonic palette is actualized in a soundscape during gameplay sessions, when the player juxtaposes to different degrees the aural content, producing a unique sonic output.

An example of that can be found in *New Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo 2009), where a multiplayer mode is introduced. When one of the participants has spent all of his character "lives", he can still participate in the session by

playing sounds through the buttons of the wiimote: different sound presets are available, and the user can switch among drum kit, percussions, 8-bit sounds, comedy sounds, and so on.

This is an example of a loosely predetermined soundscape, where the final output is not pre-composed, but rather left in the hands of the players: the sound palette is freely usable by the “dead” player. It is then possible to create counterpoints to the other player(s) action, by for example triggering a round of applause after a well executed maneuver; accompany the background music with a percussive groove; or disregard any other sound output coming from the speakers and be a disturbance to everyone by playing random sounds.

The possibility for comedic effect through the manipulation of the other player synchronesis is in this case readily available, providing an ample range of comedic affordances.

### **Bibliographic sources**

Aarseth, E. (1997). *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. JHU Press.

Bassanese, F. (1997). *Understanding Luigi Pirandello*. University of South Carolina Press.

Chion, M. (1994). *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*. Columbia University Press.

Whalen, Z. (2004). *Play Along – An Approach to Videogame Music*. GameStudies.org, Volume 4 Issue 1.

### **Author Bio**

Costantino Oliva is an Assistant Lecturer at the Institute of Digital Games, University of Malta. He is currently teaching Game Studies at undergrad and postgrad level. His research interests include soundscape analysis of sound in games and media studies applied to digital games.