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

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)

![Farmville](image.png)

# Cow Clicker (Bogost, 2010)

![Cow Clicker](image.png)
Satire [parody] that criticizes four aspects of social games:

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

(Cow Clicker: The Making of Obsession)

Cow Clicker's parody techniques

| 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

| 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”

– Malcolm 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

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 communiqué 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Help to identify the target</th>
<th>Help to understand the parodic intent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exaggeration of the clicking mechanic</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literalization through the image of the switch</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transposition of the mechanic into an indie style</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extraneous inclusion of sexual artefacts</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decontextualisation (publication of the game on Kongregate, Newgrounds, etc.)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A.V.G.M.'s paratexts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mysterious title</th>
<th>Help to identify the target</th>
<th>Help to understand the parodic intent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instructions:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;experimental game&quot;, &quot;winner for innovation&quot;, &quot;unlock the game real title&quot;</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credit at the end of the game reveal the meaning of the title &quot;Absusive Video Game Manipulation&quot; (after 10 212 clicks)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A.V.G.M.'s Reception

The majority of players did not understand the concept:

"OMG what's 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

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

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**

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

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" message, 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

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

**Progress Wars**

Progress Wars' parody techniques

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parody Technique</th>
<th>Help to identify the target</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reiteration of social games' interface elements</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exaggeration of their size and the space they occupy</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>coupled to the removal of other elements</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exaggeration of the clicking mechanic through time</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>compression</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decontextualisation (independent website)</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**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' paratexts**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The title reminds those of social games like “Mafia Wars”, while literalizing the idea of progression</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The parodic intent is stated at the bottom of the game: “Progress Wars is a parody”</td>
<td></td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**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
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