



Gameplay Rhetoric: A Study of the Construction of Satirical and Associational Meaning in Short Computer Games for the WWW

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Abstract

This paper maps out the construction of non-narrative rhetorical meaning in short computer games. Setting off from the recent emergence of short satirical computer games on the World Wide Web, it observes that at least some computer games do have potentials as a medium of artistic expression; that regardless of the possible narrative powers of computer games. Drawing on Leonard Feinberg's categories of satire and George Lakoff's theory of metaphor, the article describes the basic rhetorical mechanisms of satire and association in computer games and suggests that satire and especially allegorical association in this context appear as two sides of a common theme: the call for immortality and the mastery of computer games.

Keywords

Computer games, satire, metaphor, World Wide Web

INTRODUCTION

So far, computer games have been studied primarily in terms of narrativity or pure game function. Accordingly, whereas one wing of scholars has claimed that computer games may be seen as a medium expressing meaning due to its narrative powers (e.g. Murray; Grodal), the other has argued that computer games cannot be understood as forms of narrativity in the proper sense (Juul), or indeed that they altogether lack the ability to express profound ideas and themes: Games are first and foremost tools for playing.

This paper asserts that computer games do have potentials as a medium of artistic expression, but that a promising way to study the construction of meaning is to approach at least some computer games rather as *non-narrative rhetorical systems*. More specifically, two distinct, non-narrative rhetorical forms of meaning are taken into account, namely satirical and associational meaning. Leonard Feinberg's overview of the range of techniques used to construct satirical meaning in non-digital art forms, such as film, prose and theater, leads us to discuss the satirical forms of meaning in computer games, while the cognitive theories of metaphors and their use in poetry, as described by George Lakoff and Mark Turner, form the basis of the use of metaphor and metonymy.

Analyses of three web-served short computer games show how games may construct meaning with the use of satirical devices. The games, *Mujaffaspillet* ("The Mujaffa Game," Banjo's Likørstue and Uland Net, Danish Broadcasting Corporation), *Driving over Jakob Nielsen* (David Doull More, 2000) and *Disgruntled Daytrader* (JabTV, 2001) all make use of the satirical mechanisms of *incongruity*, *surprise*, *pretense*, and *superiority* originally described by Feinberg. By bringing these mechanisms into play in the games, satirical meaning is constructed.

Similarly an analysis of the game *Vanitasspillet* ("The Vanitas Game," pilot version, the IT University of Copenhagen, 2002) suggests the possibility that computer games may express an associative meaning by means of metaphorical and metonymic mechanisms. The various kinds of metaphorical meaning as described by Lakoff and Turner, can be said to be at work in this game, which was developed precisely in order to explore the non-narrative rhetorical potentials in short computer games. By utilizing metaphorical and metonymic structures of meaning the game expresses the *vanitas* theme well-known from traditions in art history and thus re-addressed in terms of game-play mastery and in the context of web-surfing. Following Lakoff and Turners categories, basic conceptual metaphors such as 'life is a journey' and 'death is losing a contest against an adversary' are put into action in this game by incorporating the source domains 'journey' and 'a contest against an adversary' into the game by means of gameplay, navigational features, and 3D geometry. *Journey* is represented by the movement of the third person character, which is to be lead through a maze by the player. *Death* is represented by ghosts which haunt the maze in Pacman-style and should be avoided by the player. In addition, the game makes use of metonymy to

further construct some elements of the vanitas theme. The representation of the vanitas concept of the 'futility of earthy possessions and vanities' is generated by the metonymic reference of Danish kroner bills, lotto game events, and apples, suggesting improvement of health.

COMPUTER GAMES AS NON-NARRATIVE FORM

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Although it is common to think of computer games in terms of their relation to narrativity, we think it is interesting to consider their expressive powers in terms of the way we think they may construct non-narrative meaning. Much of the research done in computer games as narrative form of expression derives from theories of film and fictional prose. In doing this, we must not forget that film and literature consist other than narrative forms of expression. Much poetic discourse, many experimental film and some modern prose and theater depend on a non-narrative form as their main structure in the construction of meaning. Focusing solely on the narrativity of computer games may result in a limitation of the view of the contribution of computer games to the field of literary expression. If taking a non-narrative approach to computer games, it will contribute to the understanding of these games in other terms than the dichotomy of seeing them as either capable of storytelling or as a pastime devoid of expressive meaning.

The concept of non-narrative form can be thought of as a form that does not make use of the basic narrative mechanisms when constructing the ideas and thoughts to be expressed. Of non-narrative forms can be mentioned *categorical*, *rhetorical*, *associational* and *abstract* form [1], but also other categorizations may be used. Many works of art depend on one of these forms, and as such they may be categorized as either 'associational' or 'abstract'.

In this study we will focus on two genres, which can be classified as being respectively associational and rhetorical. Hence, we will look at traditional non-electronic poetic and satirical discourse respectively, and by pinpointing the mechanisms of the construction of meaning in these genres, we will discuss how these same mechanisms may function in electronic games.

SATIRICAL GAMES

A certain kind of game, which has evolved with the Internet, shows us that games obviously may work as a satiric genre. During the past years, the Internet has been a popular channel for the distribution of jokes and other satirical genres. These have expressed a wide variety of humor from simple jokes to severe satire and criticism in the form of e-mail, images, animation and interactive Flash movies. A popular example is the CG animation *Alien Song* (Victor A. Navone 1999), which depicted a rather unattractive alien creature performing Gloria Gaynor's popular 70s disco song *I Will Survive*.

Hit by a falling mirror ball, the alien did obviously not survive, and this movie changed into a joke about love and fortune.

Some of these satirical artifacts on the Internet have made use of the interactive features of the electronic medium, and others have furthermore taken the form of *games*. Hence, satiric games can frequently be seen on the Internet today, most often in the form of short 2D Macromedia Flash or Shockwave games. A game of this type, which received much attention in Denmark in the year 2000, was *The Mujaffa Game*. It was published at the website of a national television station and was satirically dealing with the topic of foreign immigrants in Danish society.

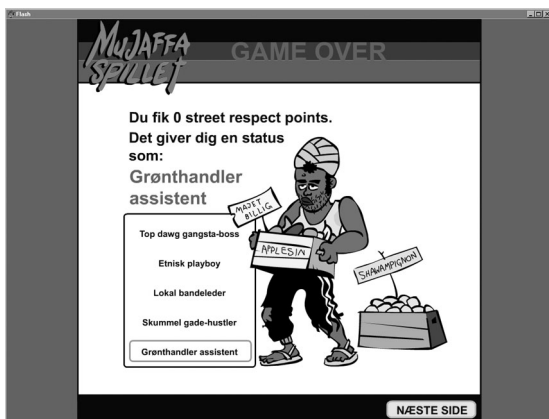
In the game, the player controls the character Mujaffa – a young male descendant of Muslim immigrants, whose main goal is to reach a high score in so-called ‘street respect’. To achieve this he must cruise down virtual streets of Copenhagen in his BMW while increasing his score by waving to his numerous cousins, who are hanging out there, and by making passes on dumb, blonde, indigenous Danish girls walking past. At the end of every round, he is allowed to choose among various gaudy accessories for his car for his next cruise, and the game continues until Mujaffa’s car has suffered a certain amount of damage. The game ends by appointing Mujaffa a status based on his street respect score. It ranges from the lowest status of ‘green grocer’s assistant’ to ‘ethnic playboy’ and the highest possible status of ‘top dawg gangsta boss’.

The important thing to notice about this game is that it seems to have a different aim than games typically have. Its gameplay is rather primitive and runs unsmoothly, and 2D graphics have long been history for racing games. From a playing point of view, this game is not very noteworthy. Its popularity must be contributed to other than traditional game features.

It is evident that this has to do rather with the ideas that it is communicating. The game is not primarily a game to be played for recreational purposes; it is to be played in order to understand the ideas, which it is communicating. In this sense, it is different to typical games like *Space Invaders*, *Quake* and *Midtown Madness*, in which a well-functioning and captivating gameplay is essential. In these types of games, game elements such as graphics, scores, and navigation merely have the function of making the game work whether it be a game of competition, chance or fantasy, and in which, it can be argued, it makes little difference whether a graphic element is substituted with another – e.g. whether a spaceship is substituted with giant insects – as long as it is clear that they are representing the enemies.

In a game like the *Mujaffa Game*, the graphic elements along with the gameplay features have an additional function. They are part of the game not merely in order to make the gameplay work and to construct the fictional world of the game, but in order to create the satiric meaning that is to be communicated to the player. As we will now explain in further detail, the game depends on a number of typical satirical devices to construct this satiric meaning.

Image 1: The Mujaffa Game.
The player has won a status
for Mujaffa as 'green grocer's
assistant' as a result of her
poor ability to achieve 'street
respect'.



THE TECHNIQUES OF SATIRE IN GAMES

Leonard Feinberg, among others, has made a comprehensive study of the basic characteristics of satirical techniques as they can be observed in a wide variety of satiric forms of the past and present. We will make use of this overview of the techniques of satire in our analyses of some satirical computer games of the Internet since they provide a general insight into the most commonly accepted varieties of the mechanisms of satire. A look on these games reveals that they, to a wide extent, depend on the same mechanisms in their construction of satiric meaning.

Feinberg identifies four basic techniques of satire: the technique of *incongruity*, the technique of *surprise*, the technique of *pretense* and the technique of *superiority*, all of which embrace a number of subcategories such as exaggeration, paradox, contrast etc. For the purpose of this relatively short paper it has been impossible to cover all the techniques in depth, so we have limited ourselves to just touching upon some. Using the Internet games *Driving over Jakob Nielsen*, *Disgruntled Daytrader* and the *Mujaffa Game* as examples, we will demonstrate how non-narrative satirical devices may work in games.

Incongruity in Computer Games

Some of the mechanisms that are often at play in the construction of satiric meaning can be termed *incongruity*. This category encompasses such techniques as *exaggeration*, *understatement*, *contrast* and *disparaging comparison*. Common for these is that there is incongruity between the way a concept is represented in the satire and the way it usually is apprehended [2].

The game *Disgruntled Daytrader* uses some of these mechanisms in the construction of its satiric meaning. It is a first person shooter made in Shockwave Flash. As indicated by the title, the game is about a day trader, who is very upset. It possibly alludes to an incident when a civilian day

trader in the US shot and killed his family and a number of innocent people. As it is quintessential of first person shooters, the player controls a gun, which is located in the front of the view. Contrary to typical shooters, which are most often 3D, in this 2D game the player has no control of movements in space. Instead a row of innocent looking people moves on a line from left to right, as in a shooting gallery. When the people are hit, they fall over, and it becomes apparent that they are flat plates and not 'real' people.

Among the satiric techniques of incongruity of this game is to be found, for example, *disparaging comparison*. Overall, the entire game may be regarded as a disparaging comparison between an actual day trader who is discontented and a shooting gallery or a Flash game. The game seems to imply that a disgruntled day trader is one who acts like the one we see in this game, that is, one who shoots as in a computer game. This disparaging comparison involves the use of *exaggeration* in that it claims that a day trader who is displeased is a day trader who shoots. Evidently, this is not a fact, even if the world has witnessed one such incident.

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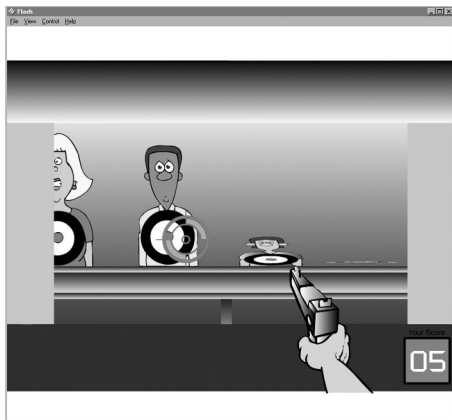


Image 2: Disgruntled Daytrader.

Pretense in Computer Games

Commonly used components of satire are those that can be headed under the term *pretense*, which has the purpose of disguising the subject of the satire. This category covers a wide range of mechanisms from *parody* to *disguise*, *deception*, and the use of *symbolism* and *allegory* [2]. Many of these seem to be readily transferred into the realm of computer games.

For example, a central device of *Disgruntled Daytrader* is its use of *parody*. The goal of parody is to make fun of a genre, a certain work of art, its content, or all of it together, and it does this through imitation of either style or content of the genre or work of art in question.

The satiric mechanism of *Disgruntled Daytrader* can be compared to that of the certain kind of parody called *low burlesque*. This kind of parody is characterized by its imitation of a genre with an elevated content in a lower style. *Daytrader* imitates the dramatic and serious content of typical shooter genre in a primitive, low-tech manner, which makes the shooting act seem comical.

Another game, *Driving over Jakob Nielsen* uses the same satiric device. The topic of the satire is Nielsen and his usability dogmas, which is a well-known subject matter to many web designers. It takes the form of a typical racing game where the player controls a vehicle driving along a road. The player is supposed to hit billboards on the road depicting Jakob Nielsen – an act that is rewarded with an additional score. Similar to *Disgruntled Daytrader* this game makes use of a lower style imitation of a genre. The graphics are very primitive, it uses a poor fake 3D effect, and the gameplay is cut down to an absolute minimum. Setting up this lower style scene for treatment of the subject of Mr. Nielsen is mocking in itself, and, in addition, it might be suspected that these elements of the game are supposed to exaggerate and parody the usability learning of minimalistic design and simplicity and thereby making fun of them. The usability inspired style is overtly parodied by the ‘instructions’ feature which helpfully explains ‘use the right arrows to move right /use the left arrows to move left / which is quite useable really!’. One of Nielsen’s famous dogmas is to make sure to provide the user with help features.



Image 3: *Driving over Jakob Nielsen*.

Surprise in Computer Games

In addition to pretense and incongruity, various techniques of *surprise* are among the mechanism often used to create a satirical meaning. These depend on failing to fulfill the expectations of the audience to create a satiric effect. It can be in the form of, for example, *unexpected logic*, *unexpected honesty*, *unexpected event*, and *anticlimax* [2].

The technique of surprise in the form of unexpected event can be seen in *Disgruntled Daytrader*. In the context of being a first person shooter and in the context of the actual real world events of the tragic day trader shooting, it may be expected that some shedding of blood will occur upon hitting the targets. Consequently, it is unexpected that they are just flat plates that flip over when hit, as in a shooting gallery. In addition, the outset of the

game may be a source of surprise. The expectations arising from the title 'disgruntled daytrader' may result in surprise when the game starts and it is revealed that it is a shooting game.

Unexpected honesty as a satiric device in games can be exemplified by the *Mujaffa Game*. Prejudice against Muslim immigrants is often regarded as taboo in the Danish society and it has led to a hypersensitivity of this subject. The game exposes and exaggerates common prejudice of this group and thus makes use of the mechanism of surprise as one of its devices in the construction of a satiric effect along with the device of exaggeration.

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Superiority in Computer Games

Another satirical device is that of catering to the superiority of the audience. Comic pleasure is experienced when the audience realizes that they in comparison with the subject of the satire are superior. To bring this feeling about can be done by the use of various strategies: by letting the victim be the subject of *small misfortunes* and *practical jokes*, by *unmasking* the failures or ignorance of the victim or by having him or her make *unintentional self-exposure*, or by simple *insult or violence* [2]. Some of these seem to be very applicable to computer games. *Small misfortunes* of either the player or other characters in the game can easily be set into action in an electronic game, failure or ignorance of a victim may be carried out by having him or her be the 'first person' of a game of high risk, thus making him a victim of *self-exposure*, and *insult or violence* are commonly known components of the game genre.

An example of the use of *violence* as a satiric mechanism in computer games can be observed in *Driving over Jakob Nielsen*, which uses this device as one of its ways of creating satiric effect. As the title indicates, the game is about driving over the victim of the satire, Jakob Nielsen. The player is gratified with the pleasure of hurting the instigator of the usability heuristics and in doing this, being given position of superiority.

In the *Mujaffa Game*, the exposition of the weaknesses of the subject of the satire is a main satirical device of the game. It pictures the presumed ignorance, bad taste, bad manners and unsavory ambitions of the main character, and is thus catering to a feeling of superiority of the audience.

ASSOCIATIONAL MEANING IN GAMES

Another way of making use of computer games as an expressive medium is by the use of metaphoric meaning and related types of meaning such as metonymy, which may all be headed under the term 'associational meaning'.

The use of metaphor has been known to be an integral part human expression since the first cave paintings. In modern times film, prose, poetry, and much more make extensive use of this form of expression. The thought that computer games should hold similar powers seems obvious.

The study by Lakoff and Johnson [5] of metaphoric meaning in everyday language has become well known as a contribution to the understanding of human thought. In another work, *More than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* [6], George Lakoff has joined forces with Mark Turner in order to point out how these mechanisms of metaphorical thinking pervades poetry as well. In the following, we will discuss how this metaphorical thinking may come to use in the design of computer games.

According to Lakoff & Turner, so-called ‘figurative language’ is often regarded just a mere ornament of language used to make it more interesting or colorful and which is clearly different from ‘literal meaning’. Contrary to this they see metaphorical language as the expression of a mode of thought which we make extensive use of in order to understand our world, our experiences, emotions and so on. In their view, metaphor is a matter of thought more than it is just a matter of words [6]. For this reason metaphors are powerful tools when it comes to expressing profound ideas. Since many thoughts and ideas are in themselves metaphorical, they are often communicated most clearly by a corresponding metaphorical expression.

The way these thought processes work can be described by using the term *mapping*. A mapping can be said to be a way of thinking about, or of understanding, one thing in terms of another. A metaphor is a mapping of two such *domains*, which can be termed the *target domain* and the *source domain*. The target domain is then understood in terms of the source domain [5]. An example of this is the metaphorical expression: ‘Innocent computer users were caught in the crossfire between lovers of rival computer languages’. In this example, the target domain ‘a fierce argument’ is mapped onto the source domain ‘crossfire’. This way the ‘argument’ is thought of in terms of crossfire. This can be said to be an instance of the basic metaphor, which can be called ‘argument is war’.

This kind of metaphor belongs to the category of *conceptual metaphor*. These metaphors are mappings between two conceptual domains, which are understood as concepts that have a certain structure consisting of a schema of fixed slots. For example, a concept can be ‘a journey’, which has the slots ‘destination,’ ‘progression along a path’, ‘mode of travel’ and so on. If the concept ‘life,’ which has the slots of ‘birth,’ ‘choices made,’ and ‘death’, is mapped on the concept ‘journey’ the slots from ‘life’ is mapped onto the corresponding slots from ‘journey,’ and ‘life’ is then understood in terms of being a journey. The result is the ‘life is a journey’ metaphor, which can then be expressed in numerous ways because the slots of ‘journey’ can be filled in with a variety of different elements [6]. ‘Destination’ may be expressed as ‘arriving at God in heaven’ or it may be ‘at the end of the road’, and ‘mode of travel’ may be ‘walking’ or ‘riding a fast car.’

The well-known poem by Robert Frost “The Road Not Taken” is an example of the way a poem evokes the ‘life is a journey’ metaphor:

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference*
(Cited in [6])

In this poem, the conceptual source domain of 'journey' is mapped onto the target domain of 'life'. When reading the poem the concept of the speaker's life is understood in terms of a journey.

The commonly known rhetorical figure of speech, metonymy and synecdoche, are by Lakoff and Turner explained as a sort of mapping as well. Counter to metaphors, it involves only one conceptual domain and the mapping takes place within this domain. Whereas metaphor is used with the purpose of *understanding*, metonymy is primarily used for reference, and it works by referring to one entity in a domain either by the use of a smaller part of the same domain or by another entity of the same domain [6]. Thus, an expression such as 'give somebody a hand', 'hand' is an element in the domain of 'assisting' and it is used to refer to the entire domain. Even if not a metaphor, it is still based on the same basic mapping, and is very much related to metaphorical thinking.

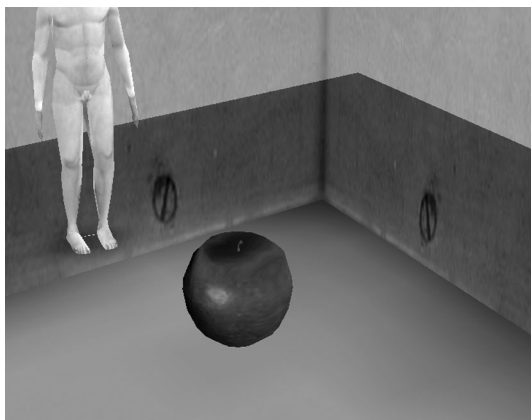
It is our idea that a computer game – like the language in a poem – may evoke these kinds of mappings in the mind of the player by serving as a source and a target domain of a metaphor.

In connection with this, it is important to point out the difference between an 'entity', such as a poem or a game, that expresses a metaphoric meaning, and an entity which is merely attributed a metaphorical meaning by the spectator. In the first case the entity expresses or hints at the target domain, while in the other case the entity contains only a source domain of which the spectator is free to attribute any target domain of his own liking. In the last case, any object, man-made or natural, can be used as a source domain for understanding. For example, a sunset may be mapped by a spectator upon his or her inner life, and thus be a source domain of a metaphor. However, the sunset cannot be said to 'express' anything in itself since the target domain is missing. A computer game has to contain both a target domain and a source domain in order to be a full metaphor and thus fulfilling our notion of being an 'expressive' form.

To illustrate how a computer game may do this we have created a game that aims at doing just this. The *Vanitas Game* is a small 3D game that is intended to communicate the *vanitas* theme. This theme has been explored by many artists throughout the ages and it concerns the notion that earthly ambitions and possessions are futile in the light of the transient nature of human life. In Renaissance painting the concept of transience was often expressed by a skull, a candle, soap bubbles, an hourglass or a clock and the earthly ambitions and possessions by various objects such as books, jewelry, weapons, which were to represent power, wealth, art, and what was likewise found futile in the age of the artist. In modern times, the *vanitas* theme is still seen to concern the futility of earthly pleasures and ambitions but artists have found other ways of expression and new objects of vanity. The painting *World War II (Vanitas)* by Audrey Flack is an example of a contemporary artist interpreting this theme in a modern context having World War II representing the concept of vanity.

Likewise, the *Vanitas Game* is intended to express a variation of this theme. Here the objects of vanity are ‘the pursuit of a long life by healthy living’ and ‘the quest of winning big money’ and ‘the desire to win anything – even a small, useless computer game.’ In the game the player controls a humanlike character in 3rd person point of view, and has the choice of exploring various paths in a maze made of transparent walls and haunted by ghosts. While avoiding the ghosts the player can collect ‘earthly goods’ in the form of money and by playing a lotto game. Both activities contribute to the score as well as the occasional apple, which may be collected in order to gain an increase in health score. The ghosts work against this scheme by lowering the health score upon collision. The player has only one life, and while it is possible to reach a high money score by collecting Danish kroner bills, collecting an apple only results in a very small health increase, which will prolong the game time by approximately a second. It is possible to terminate the game prematurely by using the emergency exits of the maze. Otherwise, the game ends when a random time is up or when health points gets down to a negative value. When this happens the player is ejected upwards from the maze and the screen turns black.

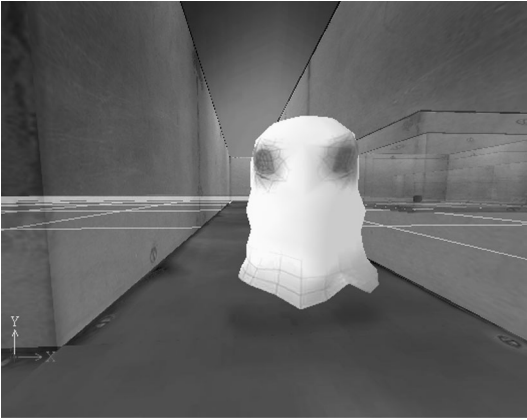
Image 4: Scene from the Vanitas Game.



It is the aim of the game to express the vanitas theme as explained above. To do this it makes use of metaphorical and metonymic construction of meaning by the use of mappings. Basic conceptual metaphors such as ‘life is a journey’ and ‘death is losing a contest against an adversary’ are evoked by incorporating the source domains ‘journey’ and ‘a contest against an adversary’ into the game by means of gameplay, navigational features, and 3D geometry. When the slots of the source domains ‘journey’ and ‘contest against an adversary’ are mapped onto the target domains ‘life’ and ‘death’ the metaphoric meaning is being generated. When experiencing the source domain of running around in transparent hallways haunted by ghosts while

hunting for the big score and a prolonged playing time in the light of the target domain 'your life', a mapping occurs between the two, and the vanitas theme is generated.

Image 5: Scene from the Vanitas Game.



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The target domain is indicated by the title of the game and by the game-intro. The intro informs the player that the forthcoming game is about 'life' by raising the question: 'what do you want to do the rest of your life?' followed by a 'Go'-button, which launches the game.

The source domain concept of journey is represented by the movement of the third person character, which is to be lead through a maze by the player. Slots in this concept, such as 'crossroads', 'destination' and mode of travel are filled in by various game features. Crossroads are represented by different path options in the labyrinth; 'destination' is materialized as 'something you don't know of before you get there'; and mode of travel as a choice between walking and running. The game also makes use of metonymy to construct some elements of the source domain. The representation of the vanitas concept of the 'futility of earthy possessions and vanities' is generated by the metonymic reference of Danish kroner bills, lotto game events and apples.

Image 6: Scene from the Vanitas Game.



GAMEPLAY RHETORIC: SATIRE, ALLEGORY, AND COMPUTER GAMES

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So far, we have analyzed four short computer games for the World Wide Web that make use of rhetorical mechanisms of satire and association to express a content that cannot be taken for narrativity and which exceeds the level of the computer game itself, that is, pure game functionality. In the course of these analyses we have identified the basic categories of satirical rhetoric and shown how this rhetoric works in our examples. Further, by drawing on Lakoff and Turner's cognitive schemata for the functioning of metaphor, we have established the possibility of associational rhetoric in a variety of short computer games. Whereas proper examples of this type of game seem rare, our demonstrations project *Vanitas* has shown how this potential may still be realized as an allegorical content based on the association of target and source domains given by conceptual metaphors such as 'life is a journey' and 'death is loosing a contest against an adversary.' In this manner we have established that computer games can contain both a target domain and a source domain and in this sense fully realize a metaphor in the proper sense. Computer games are thus indeed fulfilling our notion of being 'expressive.'

It should be noted that this work by no means claims to advance a general theory of the construction of non-narrative meaning in short computer games. What we have shown is simply that construction of satirical and associational meaning is possible, and that the general categories of satire and metaphor also seem to apply to computer games, or at least to a certain genre of computer games, namely a genre of short games for distribution via the World Wide Web. Games that you, roughly speaking, only play once since, of course, the point is not playing the game but getting the particular point hinted by the non-narrative rhetoric. These are games that paradoxically exceed themselves as games by utilizing their potentials as media of artistic expression. This is perhaps why it makes sense to speak about short games: There is no reason to venture into game genres which take a long time to play, if the point can be delivered immediately.

The question is however at this stage whether or not we have established anything specific about computer games. Paradoxically we find that this is in fact the case. Looking back on our analyses one cannot help noticing two aspects that satirical and associational, or allegorical, rhetoric have in common. First, what catches our eye is that satirical as well as associational games all make use of rhetorical breaking of norms that also concerns their status as games. As we saw above, satirical practice not only applies to a certain theme represented in the games, but also to the games themselves, playing with surprising solutions in their gameplay and their graphic design. For instance, the unexpected use of 2D and 3D is striking in both categories of games: first person shooters and racing games being rendered in 'naïve' 2D Shockwave Flash. Also *Vanitas*, the Pac-Man parody being based on the *NeMo Web* plug-in for immersive 3D. The low burlesque parody on game form seems indispensable, no matter whether we are talking about satire or association. One can hardly imagine a non-narrative rhetoric in the terms

above without a general satirical touch. Satire allows computer games to exceed themselves as games.

Second, irrespective of their parodying game form, and regardless of their satirical or generally associational character, all our examples seem to circle about a *common theme*. Beyond realizing a specific associational content, *Vanitas* also seems to point towards a very general aspect concerning the playing of a computer game; namely the simple fact that in games it is possible to turn the clock back or start all over again. By suspending this option, *Vanitas* not only emphasizes the association between ‘game’ and ‘life;’ it also succeeds in sustaining a certain melancholia associated with the playing of computer games; a melancholia that stems from the fact that no matter how scrupulous one may be as the developer of an entire empire in *Civilization*, and no matter how effective a sweeper one may be in a first person shooter, it is in a sense all in vain since ‘this is not life anyway.’ Especially not, that is, since one is playing against the machine and not against people that one knows. In the latter case, the social structure of players would probably over-determine the game mastery theme. Game mastery, on the contrary, is the mastery of game perceived as a machine and not the victory over other individuals.

Tied up with the urge for general game mastery, this touch of melancholia not only characterizes the allegorical rhetoric but certainly also that of satire. In the *Mujaffa* game – which by the way is satirical in a low burlesque fashion also by being extremely difficult – one may eventually end up as a ‘top dawg gangsta boss’. And so what! Why spend a lot of time on a game that is meant to be too difficult? This is of course also part of the joke. By twisting satirically the player’s objective in the game, even *Mujaffa* suggests a subtle melancholia and thus lends from the double domain structure in associational rhetoric. So, exactly by exceeding themselves as games, these short games seem to manage to emphasize profound ideas regarding ‘Game and Life;’ ideas that vanish in ordinary non-rhetorical computer games. In computer games, satire and allegory are interwoven; they are two sides of a common theme: the call for immortality and the mastery of computer games.

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