

Paradox and Play: Beyond Computer Games

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Playing means fun, resolved in laughter, and it has little to do with the products of entertainment industries. This paper wants to reveal the subversive power of laughter, fun and play beyond gaming.

The phenomenon of laughing is usually linked to the comical, which is the human experience of the paradox. In the world of the comical, the rules differ from those in reality. Like games, the rules of reality are suspended. Humour represents a possibility of subjective and individual experiences to perceive something as comical. The impression of the comical or the funny can be resolved by laughing.

The scientific examination of laughter has always been interdisciplinary since philosophy, physiology, anthropology, psychology, and sociology, as well as religious and art studies have investigated laughter and humor from different points of views.

Plato (427-348 BC) dealt with the dangerous notion of laughing, and, rather than focusing on the aspect of fun coming along with laughter, he recognized its power to subvert, which could work destructively on the state, and even undermine it. He suggested laughter as the privilege of the superior, and as a sign of power, and thus became the first thinker to link laughter and subversion. Laughter was to be avoided and “persons of worth, even if only mortal men, must not be represented as overcome by laughter, and still less must such a representation of the gods be allowed.”¹ There were only bad consequences of intense laughter, which for him was above all a mixture of anxiety and pleasure, a Schadenfreude. In order to build up the ideal state Plato even wanted to purge literature from its laughing heroes and gods.

In the same line, Aristotle (384-322 BC) argued that laughter was a form of a sophisticated disrespect and of subversive effrontery, but, as a form of the comical,

it would not be wrong or hurting. Laughter was like a mask, which was ugly and deforming, but did not cause pain. However, Aristotle also concluded that laughter was linked with a specific form of surprise and unexpectancy. Following Umberto Eco, there exists an Aristotelian theory of laughter, which was included within his lost second book of Poetic. According to this, laughter was an art, a philosophy, which liberates from constraint. In the 14th century, the recovery of this book in a monastic library in Italy would be avoided by all means — a story, which is told in Eco’s *The Name of the Rose*.

In 1776, James Beattie introduced the notion of incongruity when two unfitting parts were put into one context, thus evoking laughter, and Immanuel Kant stated that laughter was caused by something paradoxical.

Perhaps, the cyberneticist Gregory Bateson explained best the subversive character of humor we are interested in: As for a joke, the messages in the first phase of telling the joke carry some informational content on the surface, whereas some other content is implicit in the background. When the point of a joke is reached, suddenly the background material is brought into attention and a paradox is opened. “A circuit of contradictory notions is completed.”² It is about a figure-ground relation: when we, for instance, think or name a person, a figure, or a table, we have, according to Bateson, also defined the existence of a universe of not-this, a ground. The first step toward the paradox is to say that the person who speaks about a table is thereby defining the class of non-tables. To complete the paradox means to actually treat the non-table, which is to close the circuit of ideas. Following Bateson, the paradoxes are the prototype of humor, and laughter occurs at the moment when such circuits are closed.

Laughter implies a comparison of the code of one individual with the code adopted by the group. Laughter

arises, for instance, when the individual observed does not behave according to the code of the observers. Laughter is one way of bridging the discrepancy or the gap. A machine, for instance, which was thrown into some sort of oscillating condition by some contradiction, would, if it could, laugh whenever the input and the coding did not match properly.

Emerging from contradiction, it is this sort of humor, which demonstrates the flexibility and the freedom of discussion within a social situation or relationship. It is the freedom to admit paradox, the freedom to talk nonsense, to entertain illogical alternatives, and to play, which is reserved to an individual humor not pre-programmed and pre-performed by entertainment industries.

We are into such humorous and playful statements or works that treat non-tables, that demonstrate subjective observation and paradoxical imagination, and in this way individually question the surface of commodities, of design objects, of entertainment structures and cultural narratives.

The works that allude to things and uses and at the same time imagine their counterparts, non-things, and anti-uses can complete these circuits of figure and ground, which produce humor. It is about conventions and the inversion of conventions, which, not only make fun, but which become important if conventions, such as fashions and trends, are usually set up by money-intensive



Figure 1: Bagel to go³



Figure 2: Eiffel Tower manipulated by introducing noise⁵

markets and their industries. Therefore, we investigate different forms of medial works and plays that somehow close up the circle of paradox, and thus show alternative practices to the mass market and the common culture. Forms of creative misuse offend technological industries and mass culture by succumbing to homogenous and uniform commodities. In the words of Michel de Certeau, consumption “is devious, it is dispersed, but insinuates itself everywhere, silently, and almost invisibly, ...”⁴

As we are architects, we close by showing a series of unstable architectures trying to react on a fashionable high-end rendering culture, that usually displays smooth photorealistic and very clean images. In playing with user software, we came up to introduce noise to 3D forms, generating paradoxical forms of well-known buildings.

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- 1 Plato, 360 B.C.E, *The Republic, Book III*, translated by Benjamin Jowett, <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.4.iii.html>
 - 2 Gregory Bateson. 1953. *Humor in Human Communication, in: Cybernetics. Circular Causal and Feedback Mechanisms in Biological and Social Systems*, Heinz von Foerster (ed.). New York, p. 3
 - 3 <http://www.flickr.com/photos/piwonka/384203161>
 - 4 Michel de Certeau. 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life* (original: *L'invention du quotidien. Vol. 1, Arts de faire'*, 1980). http://www.ubu.com/papers/de_certeau.html
 - 5 Teast (Asli Serbest, Mona Mahall). 2007. *Unstable Architectures*, photo collages.