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Author(s): Karhulahti, Veli-Matti; Bonello Rutter Giappone, Krista

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Punchline Behind the Hotspot: Structures of Humor, Puzzle, and Sexuality in Adventure Games (with *Leisure Suit Larry* in Several Wrong Places)

VELI-MATTI KARHULAHTI, AND
KRISTA BONELLO RUTTER GIAPPONE

Back in the late 1970s and early 1980s, during the embryonic era of computers, hackers, and all that digitalized punk jazz, who would have guessed that one of the period's juvenile narrative arts—"interactive fiction" it was called at the time—would soon lead to a pop cultural revolution? A young scholar named Mary Ann Buckles did. Having spent years analyzing a piece of software that the present history knows as the most influential of all computerized text-based playthings, *Adventure*, in 1985, Buckles eventually completed her doctoral dissertation with a first-ever focus on something that had thus far been struggling to be taken seriously by cultural critics: storygames running on computers. Buckles foresaw:

> I view interactive fiction in its present stage as an immature medium capable of artistic development. [We] are at the beginning of what could be an explosive development of interactive fiction [and while] games like *Adventure* do not yet have a generally accepted name ... "Adventure games" might win out in the long run, much as "Kleenex" is used instead of "facial tissue."
>
> (Buckles 6–9)

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And so, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, adventure games enter the mainstream—first in plain text form, led by companies like Infocom and Level 9, and later with graphic adventures from Sierra Online and LucasArts. In the late 1990s and the subsequent 2000s, the normalization of gaming becomes a fact somewhat globally. Meanwhile, the notion "adventure game" remains as a signifier for a distinct genre that Buckles described as a kind of decipherable "comic strip," thus being careful to distinguish it from videogames proper:

> [Adventure games] do not resemble games like Donkey Kong, Space Invaders, or Pac-Man, which require good hand-eye co-ordination and quick physical reactions. There are no flashing lights, beeps, or grinding noises. The reader enters words into the computer to communicate with the narrator and generates a story; (s) he does not press buttons to aim electronic projectiles or fire simulated weapons.
>
> (6)

Instead of asking players to compete, react, and strategize (as videogames usually do), adventure game players access humor-filled stories that are systematically blocked by "puzzles." While the signifying function of "adventure game" has since widened markedly, herein the focus is on the above, narrower conceptualization set forth by Buckles.[1]

Through the wide-ranging catalog of text-based titles in the 1980s, the graphic adventure boom in the 1990s, and ultimately the re-popularization of the genre by recent independent developers, the comic element has always been central to the adventure game (Bonello Rutter Giappone). Nowadays, the premise also stands on empirical evidence; for instance, Anne-Marie Grönroos's study of videogame humor analyzed 659 gaming magazine reviews written between 2010 and 2012 and found that a quarter of the reviewed titles contained explicit humor. Of those, the adventure game genre was clearly the most humorous one, as almost "all of the adventure games were primarily comedic, and the quality of their jokes was often scrutinized in the review" (Grönroos 18). For further evidence, the present study commenced with a systematic review of the "Top 100 Adventure Games" list assembled by a leading community, Adventure Gamers. Despite the fact that high-status critical rankings like this typically favor "serious" works over those with "comic" appeal (to employ a

problematic cultural binary), more than half of the titles were explicitly humorous. For context, many of these titles belong to popular series such as *Monkey Island* (Lucasfilm Games, since 1990), *Simon the Sorcerer* (Adventure Soft, since 1993), and *Discworld* (Perfect 10 Productions, since 1995).[2] With the above as a starting-point, the goal of this study is to solve the persistent meta-puzzle that has troubled critics, scholars, and popular culture experts within the field since Buckles: Why do adventure games, as a literary form with a history extending over seven decades, make use of humor as their means of expression to such a remarkable extent?

Answers to the above are sought via a comparative analysis of two conceptual trajectories, humor and puzzles, that synthesize in the adventure game to a degree that has nowadays reached the status of substantial cultural convention. An argument is set forth as follows: humor and puzzles operate on similar structural principles and thus run on explicit *enigmatic synergy* that functions as one (yet not the sole) explanation for the adventure game's inclination to treat its diverse themes through the comic. Methodologically, the argument relies on an analytical close reading of a well-known adventure game series, *Leisure Suit Larry* (1987–97), selected for its clear thematic frame of sexuality, which resonates with humor and puzzles. The analysis maps out how *Leisure Suit Larry*'s humor and puzzles operate together and serve its thematics, thus exemplifying the mechanisms of enigmatic synergy that govern adventure game design in general.

Riddle, Puzzle, Fiction Puzzle

The puzzle is a macro concept that incorporates a rich multitude of variants such as chess problems, crosswords, jigsaws, mechanical puzzles, and sudokus. While the study of such phenomena can be traced back to at least Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, it was the mid-twentieth century when folklorists like Archer Taylor (1943) and Robert Georges and Alan Dundles (1963) uncovered a structural foundation of riddles via systematic analysis. Dan Pagis, a poet and riddle scholar, offers an apt summary:

> Every riddle contains two parts of unequal length: the encoded text and revealed solution. These parts are opposites that seek to

> unite, thus eliminating the tension of opposition between them. The riddle, however, exists for the sake of that very tension, which reflects the social tension, the contest between riddler and riddle . . . The moment the riddle is completed, it also ceases to exist.
> (83–84)

The above structural duality still persists at the center of puzzle and riddle analysis today (see Kaivola-Bregenhøj, "Form and Performance," for a review). For the present purposes, a further note of theoretical relevance comes from Marcel Danesi's explication of the process through which the duality of puzzles, including that of the riddle, is opened up in the act of solving. Puzzles, he argues,

> are not solved by the use of accurate reckoning alone [but] also (and above all else) by a substantial use of insight thinking . . . in a phrase, insight thinking does not emerge fortuitously or haphazardly. It comes about only after the observation and contemplation of recurring patterns. Insight thinking can be defined as the ability to see with the mind's eye the inner nature of some specific thing.
> (27–28)

In this way, Danesi initiates a phenomenological bridge between the two-sided structure of the puzzle and the human mind working to connect them. Later, he further points out that the process is comparable to

> what might be called our instinct for humor. No one knows exactly why we are impelled to laugh or why anything that is perceived as funny should cause us to make such peculiar noise . . . similarly, when we are given a puzzle to solve, our mind sharpens, our *logica utens* starts working, and we set out to find a solution, as if by instinct, until we are satisfied cathartically.
> (35)

Building on Danesi and his folkloristic predecessors, Veli-Matti Karhulahti's *Adventures of Ludom* reformulates puzzle theory in the field of videogame research and characterizes the most recent structural updates. Karhulahti identifies the puzzle as a challenge that, due to its immobile nature, lacks the kinetic and strategic depth on which the majority of videogames rely:

> puzzles are best theorized as conceptual, immaterial demands the overcoming of which happens outside the empirical; in contrast to strategic demands that can never be given a stable conceptual form due to their open-endedness; that is, strategic demands exist only along with the player's recursive empirical input.
>
> (30)

Accordingly, it is the immaterial conceptuality that separates the puzzle from other ludic challenges in videogame culture in particular: whereas the physically and strategically oriented challenges that dominate contemporary gaming are potentially never-ending loops of cybernetic rediscovery (recall Buckles), the structural binary of the static puzzle entails an insightful process of meaning-making that has its own aesthetic and rhetoric.

In adventure games in particular, these puzzles tend to occur as specific *fiction puzzles* (i.e., problems integrated as actions and events in the adventure games' exclusive storyworlds), rather than mere logico-mathematical brainteasers or other abstract dilemmas (Karhulahti, "Puzzle"; "Fiction Puzzle"). As such, fiction puzzles surface as ludo-semiotic constructs, the solving of which is a hermeneutic meaning-making process that may (and often does) involve insight thinking, eventually leading to a pleasurable epiphanic surprise.

To a large extent, the hermeneutic (fiction) puzzle-solving process and its pivotal moment of insight are strikingly comparable to the way in which joke "set-ups" and "background patterns" are turned around by punch-lines. Analyses of the joke formula often fall into one (or more) of three theoretical threads, traditionally identified as "superiority," "incongruity," and "relief" (Morreall). While none of the three theoretical categories can account for all instances of comic effect, they appear to supplement each other (Raskin in Morreall 7). As such, and despite their limitations, the theories help comprehend the relationship between the puzzle-riddle and the humor-joke domains, thereby affording a valuable foundation for enigmatic synergy. Below, all three theories are taken into account, respectively, as their co-occurrence in adventure games is explored through the case study of *Leisure Suit Larry*.

Enigmatic Synergy

To recap, puzzles (and fiction puzzles in particular) share a structural similarity with humor (and jokes in particular). The two structurally similar sides complement each other in a way that sparks *enigmatic synergy*, which often materializes in adventure games that challenge their players with fiction puzzles in thematically diverse story contexts. In practice, enigmatic synergy can be considered as a certain coinciding tension between likeness and incongruity (of puzzle and humor) that provokes laughter. Most prominently, the satisfying closure of a puzzle solution—be it reached accidentally or by strenuous deduction—reopens onto vibratory release akin to the pattern that occurs in the production of laughter. Such resemblances suggest that the puzzle and/or joke may sometimes be read through each other; for instance, a solution to a puzzle often depends on "getting it," as if it were a joke or some other instance of humor. Puzzles and humor are both essential elements of *Leisure Suit Larry*. The *Larry* series was conceived by the software artist Al Lowe in 1987 along with the first episode *Leisure Suit Larry in the Land of the Lounge Lizards*, published by Sierra On-line (later Sierra Entertainment). As such, *Larry* represents perhaps the most popular franchise of adventure games that expressly deals with sexuality—next to similarly themed titles such as *Leather Goddesses of Phobos* (Infocom, 1986), *2064: Read Only Memories* (MidBoss, 2015), as well as multipart series such as *Les Manley* (Accolade, 1990–91) and *Spellcasting* (Legend Entertainment, 1990–92). Story-wise, *Larry* centers on the antihero Larry Laffer: a wannabe-Casanova whose one and only goal in life is "to find a woman and get laid." In line with the conventions of the genre (which were still being consolidated at the time), reaching this goal requires the player to solve fiction puzzles that are integrated into the story, thus presenting (mostly heterosexual) sex and sexualities as mysteries to be deciphered in a very literal sense.

Despite (or due to) its adult thematics, the first *Larry* episode was a commercial success. It eventually sold more than 300,000 copies and led Lowe to write five direct sequels for Sierra by 1997, altogether selling millions of copies and becoming likely the most popular series of erotic videogames in Western history. In one quantitative study (n = 281) on computer users born between 1960 and 1989, no

less than 99 percent of the respondents were familiar with *Larry* (Reunanen et al.). Though this study likely involved some response bias due to its specific method of collection (via IRC, Facebook, and gaming forums), industry experts have also repeatedly recognized *Larry*'s influence and popularity—including the occasional estimation that a significant proportion of *Larry* players were actually female (Rosen). With this context in mind, the present analysis delves into the specific mechanic (fiction puzzles) and thematic (sexual humor) synergy that makes adventure games like *Larry* exceptionally suitable for expression through laughter.

Larry through Superiority Theory

Laughing at the misfortunes of others can be fun. This is the assumption underlying the *superiority theory* of humor, which is more specifically based upon a perception of discrepancy that seems to satisfyingly confirm the laugher's superiority in relation to an object deemed worthy of contempt. Hence, the superiority theory would appear to presuppose a degree of cruelty, which was already entertained by Plato when he suggested laughter "mix[es] pleasure with malice" in finding something "ridiculous" in the misfortunes of others (58–59, 49b–50a). Thomas Hobbes's better-known formulation of this view locates its cause in the laughers' "apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves" (125). More recently, in *The Game of Humor*, Charles Gruner gives the superiority theory a less negative spin, noting a fundamental similarity between humor and games in a shared dynamic of competition, striving for victory and overcoming. He suggests that "punning riddles," for example, aim to "*defeat* their targets/publics with brilliant verbal exhibitionism" (145). Along the same lines, one of the leading riddle theorists Annikki Kaivola-Bregenhøj ("Riddles and Humour") describes riddles as a lesson in "humiliation and its tolerance" (197). Through these frames, the superiority effect gains a function that is both comic and ludic at the same time.

In *Leisure Suit Larry 6: Shape Up or Slip Out!* (Sierra Entertainment, 1993), the expected outcome of each encounter is a climactic sex scene. The scenes tie to Larry's quest to win women by giving them

an item they desire or by performing tasks that please them—a pattern established by the first episode.[3] Yet, the expectation of sexual satisfaction for Larry is overturned: the woman in each case (apart from the last) is only a step on the way to obtaining a piece of the overarching fiction puzzle that will yield results with the final, ideal woman. In this way, the promised sexual encounter in *Larry 6* is deferred, replaced by one that caters to the woman's desire and satisfaction when it is revealed that her understanding and expectation fail to correspond with that of Larry's. This outcome is consistently painful or humiliating for Larry. His desires are repeatedly frustrated, but since the events are comically framed, the consequences are not severe or lasting, and Larry simply bounces from one downfall to another in the manner of slapstick (Figure 1). In Henri Bergson's view, this capacity for "rebounding" (being ruled by "habit" as opposed to learning from past mistakes) contributes to the comedy and the impression of "inelasticity" (5, 29, 35, 49).[4]

FIGURE 1. Throughout the series, Larry gets frequently humiliated but eventually reaches his goal. It is worth paying attention to how Larry's self-image (left) is represented via distinct visualization: his own ideal conception of self while being dominated in petplay ("You're the puppy dog and I'm the Mommy dog!"). At the same time, Larry's thoughts are presented as those of the player ("You") with the controversial pun (Well, you ARE quite the bitch!) addressing his dominatrix. *Leisure Suit Larry 6: Shape Up or Slip Out!* (Sierra Entertainment, 1993). [Color figure can be viewed at wiley onlinelibrary.com]

In *Larry 6*, the lack of correspondence between the women and Larry's interpretations of the governing respective situations generates an incongruity that the player may come to expect. Thus, the player derives pleasure not simply from the answer, but also (through a kind of comic dramatic irony) from Larry's comparative blindness, as well as from Larry's "wrong" understanding. Larry's persistent hopes and efforts may appear ridiculous in this light, as players are openly invited to laugh at Larry's expense over and over again. In Lowe's own words, "I used sex to laugh at Larry and tried to make a game where you laughed at sex rather than being excited by it" (qtd. in Brown). This laughter is not without cruelty, however, for the player's success is precisely Larry's failure until the last fiction puzzle with the final woman, through which Larry finally receives his gratification. Yet, with the frequent habit of *Larry 6* constantly addressing the player and Larry simultaneously as "you," there is also an invitation to self-deprecating humor and a reluctance to allow full indulgence in feeling superior.

As a whole, the *Larry* series tends to tease the player by delivering or denying explicit graphics. At strategic moments of *Larry 7: Love for Sail!* (Sierra Entertainment, 1996), the player shares Larry's perspective, and, for example, in order to reveal "Drew Baringmore's" breasts, the player must literally (by means of the verbal command interface) "push" away a "pesky branch." This command must be guessed and typed in; no available regular command will do to provide easy and immediate gratification. In this way, *Larry 7* addresses the player with a specific enigma where ludic satisfaction synergizes with that of (diegetic excited Larry) moving the titillating pesky branch (Figure 2).

In the history of adventure games more broadly and text adventure in particular, this vein of fun in riddling failure lines up with their specific "frustration aesthetic" by the "art of error message design" (Douglass). Such courting of failure on the way to unlocking the "correct" interpretation is also typical of sexual riddles, as Kaivola-Bregenhøj observes: "One thing all sexual riddles have in common [is that] the right answer is always in a sense the wrong one" ("Sexual Riddles"). The adventure game, in turn, has always relied on players needing to try out every single option and collecting useless objects ("pathological kleptomania") that generates constant failures and errors, typically making a fool out of the protagonist. Akin to this

FIGURE 2. Drew Baringmore and the pesky branch. *Larry 7: Love for Sail!* (Sierra Entertainment, 1996). [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

lineage, exploring conversation options by directly asking for sex in any *Larry* often results in scorn being heaped upon him and his overreaching aspirations. The fiction puzzle design, however, allows for and anticipates such experimentation, as ludic errors usually reward the player with comic drama and/or successful progression.

In the second episode of the series from 1988, *Leisure Suit Larry Goes Looking for Love (in Several Wrong Places)*, if the player decides to make Larry directly approach his romantic interest, Barbie, by entering her cabin, Larry will face a "hilarious" end by being tortured to death by Barbie's BDSM-inclined mother who "proceeds to have her way with *you* repeatedly" (emphasis added). While the function of Barbie's aged mother (as a violation of sorts, in terms of assumed cultural standards of desire) is to terminate Larry's progress, it also serves the playful experiment-fail-experiment-succeed formula, through which the superiority effect emerges as part of testing and teasing: Larry receives his punishment as the alter-ego scapegoat, so that the players can claim their erotic (to a degree) and ludic rewards (Figure 3).

But who, in the end, gets punished and feels superior, the player or the protagonist? As noted earlier, the *Larry* series (and Sierra's adventure games in general) tend to implicate the player through

FIGURE 3. Larry and Barbie's mother; a "game over," that is. *Leisure Suit Larry Goes Looking for Love (in Several Wrong Places)* (Sierra Entertainment, 1988). [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

second-person address along with the protagonist. This, nevertheless, is not clear-cut; and of course, players always watch Larry's painful humiliations and frequent violent deaths from a safe distance, perhaps with a touch of *schadenfreude*. Still, along with progress, it is the player's past errors that turn into a gradual epiphany of control: as puzzles get solved, Larry and his partners get demystified and exposed—a distinct superiority comes into being through the ludic-comic, disarming Larry's "deaths" of their initial danger and turning them into something to laugh at.

Larry through Relief Theory

Adventure games let us expect that their fiction puzzles can be overcome, but the solution's surprise might equally involve circumvention or substitution. This ties in with *relief theory* (aka *release theory*), which is best-represented by Sigmund Freud's influential approach. Namely, the build-up to laughter, for Freud, is geared toward some kind of release as a socially acceptable outlet for the "satisfaction of a drive . . . (be it lustful or hostile) in face of an obstacle in its way"

(98). This diversion of energy is most loaded in the case of what Freud calls "tendentious" jokes, which navigate and circumvent taboos and inhibitions, thus fulfilling a purpose and usually having an implied (more or less indirect) target. This, again, echoes Kaivola-Bregenhøj's note on riddles: "When delicate matters are dressed in humor, youngsters learn to speak of them in a way that is socially acceptable" ("Riddles and Humour" 200).

Along these lines, adventure games and humor provide a safe environment for the exploration of provocative themes. While explicit sex in *Larry* (not that common, though the allusions are overt) is itself conveyed in a way that is not full-blown pornography, limited by the audiovisual technology of the time, the synergy between Larry's aim (sex) and the player's goal (solving sex) denotes sex being clearly part of the joke. One may recall here Lowe's assertion that *Larry* is not simply *about* sex—and indeed, sex *per se* is rare—but it would be difficult to imagine any *Larry* without sex governing its thematics. This inseparability also applies to its humor.

In the *Larry* series, comic relief tends to surface through the contrasting teamwork of punishment and liberation. In fact, moderation and caution are necessary in various lethal encounters; the player learns something that a new (re-loaded) Larry fresh off the production line will benefit from. In one scene, unprotected sex in *Larry 1* leads to the contraction of a venereal disease followed by death. At the time (1987), safe sex was not widely tackled in popular media, and condom ads were banned from television until the proliferation of the HIV epidemic in the late 1980s. *Larry 1* integrates this serious issue in a way that encourages reflection: Larry's pseudo-death influences the player's actions on return.

The framing of the scene also targets the way condoms caused social anxiety, for Larry is forced to go through increasingly ridiculous options (to the player's amusement and delight) to pick a "customized" condom at the pharmacy via a series of choices that the pharmacist then loudly announces to everybody in the shop: "Hey, everybody!! This weird-o just bought a spearmint-flavored, striped, rough-cut, colored, smooth lubber!!!" The announcement is greeted by shocked gasps from the more "respectable" customers, and while Larry's embarrassment is funny, a commentary on harmful social perceptions may be read into it.

On a more problematic note, hostility and lust may also combine in "bawdry" (or "smut") that in Freud's view replaces the desired touching of an inaccessible person and makes use of speech rather than action (95–98). It presumes "the woman's intransigence" but also lays siege to this and may also function as part of a soliciting approach; or, as Kaivola-Bregenhøj observes of sexual riddles, as a way of flirtatiously bringing erotic tensions to the fore ("Sexual Riddles"). Playful diversion, as in the Freudian "tendentious" joke, may mask and channel desire as well as hostility. In a typical smut scenario, as per Freud, the intended target of the joke (usually a woman) tends to be supplanted by a third party in the role of a primary listener—the target is objectified and presented to the third party as the inhibiting "obstacle" to be "attacked" (with the joke), thereby getting "unclothed" through words.

In the *Larry* series, female characters are frequently the goal and the mystery to be solved. In *Larry 6*, progress occasionally involves clicking on the desired bodies, including one character who soon reveals herself to be transgender, provoking excessive disgust from Larry. No doubt, Larry's reaction is problematically in line with the cultural cis norms of femininity that work to "frame trans women's bodies as fascinatingly and disgustingly underclass" (Vähäpassi 5). At the same time, one could recall the narrator's casually observational quip on Larry's own cross-dressing in *Larry 2*: "You slip back into your leisure suit and toss the bikini and soap far over the cliff. Too bad, as you were beginning to enjoy wearing women's clothing!" While it would be inaccurate to equate Larry's enjoyment with women's clothing to trans identities, footnotes like this remind us that the heteronormativity of the *Larry* series is a puzzle without a straightforward solution. Despite the sexism, laughter at the overturning of expectations sometimes encounters the normalization (and implied acceptance) of different sexual practices and identities.

In the *Larry* series, sexualization is thus not only integrated via respective fiction puzzles and humor, but it also becomes thematically mechanically fused. Everything in Larry's world is potentially sexualized, and everything sexual may also be potentially re-purposed. The player can order a "Gigantic Erection" (cocktail) in *Larry 7*, and the ambiguity—paradoxical as it may be to apply this term to something so explicit—also allows for amusing misunderstandings between characters and becomes an opportunity to flirt with Drew

Baringmore. And yet, it is also still a means to an end: ordering a Gigantic Erection forces the bartender to leave his post ("that'll take a while, are you sure?") and grants access to the next explorable location.

The mixing of comedy with the sexual and the mechanical extends also to the very basics of interaction: the cursor—a player's means of access to *Larry 7*—is a condom that fills out and extends on a "hotspot"; a cosmetic amendment to the form that does not essentially alter the conventional point-and-click interface but makes overt a possible link between the theme and the very technics of the adventure game genre (i.e., action is literally phallocentrically styled via erection). As the player's clicks contribute to the climax (solution), progression is always preceded by teasing: a foreplay of sorts that delays satisfaction and completion, prolonging the narrative in a series of repetitions punctuated by bursts.

Female characters in *Larry* are often both desired objects and solvable fiction puzzles at once. With this in mind, it is interesting how little effort is required to gain the attention of the male towel attendant (the only actively willing and immediately consenting partner in Larry's world), though Larry himself seems ambivalent and the narrator mocks the outcome as "an ignominious end." While a player may read in this a troublingly stereotyped association of promiscuity with homosexuality, in contrast, the women are obtained or won by delivering items or finding other solutions for the sought-after goal. With some notable exceptions (see Patti below), the women's desires do not usually directly include Larry himself, which entangles his relationships with women in a network of exchange that builds up a surplus of repressed energy awaiting (delayed) expenditure. Accordingly, choosing the homosexual option feels like a case of the player's agency overriding Larry's heterosexual desires (at times open to question nonetheless). By actively including sexual and other minorities, the *Larry* series contributes to inclusion and normalization; simultaneously, though, the laughter present in their representation (as in other representations) enables controversial or conservative interpretations.

Narratologically, the *Larry* series relies strongly on an external omniscient narrative voice as well as Larry's own focalized internal consciousness (Figure 1). While this narrative duality and its inconsistencies generate plenty of riddling humor, it also makes any

straightforwardly hermeneutic reading of the plot difficult or impossible—what Larry himself thinks may differ radically from what the voice narrates (de-centering the protagonist's voice and desires). Furthermore, the (audio)visual representation of entities and (stereo)types still complicates arriving at a final reading of what "*Larry* is trying to say about sexuality" as a politico-cultural product. More often than not, as Larry attempts to fix his efforts on a woman, the narrating voice shames Larry and trivializes his desires, which may turn Larry from desiring adventurer to comic butt. Nevertheless, Larry *does* usually achieve his goal in the end (if the player is successful) by "earning" it, that is, by finding out what the women want and satisfying their wishes. Hence, Larry's sexual desire is deflected and the fiction puzzles multiplied before accessing the finale.

The gendered relations become more complex in the two *Larry* episodes that allow the player to control the desiring woman "Passionate Patti" as a secondary protagonist. In the first of these, *Leisure Suit Larry 3: Passionate Patti in Pursuit of the Pulsating Pectorals* (Sierra Entertainment, 1989), Larry falls in love and initiates a relationship with Patti; however, due to a misunderstanding, he comes to believe that Patti is seeing another man and eventually leaves her to begin a celibate life as a hermit ("I give up. I've had it with women! It's just not worth it! I'm going where no woman will ever frustrate me again!"). As the player is left with (control over) Patti, one is finally granted direct access to a (fictional) woman's mind too. While Patti's actions, feelings, and thoughts ("Oh, no! I finally meet the man of my dreams, and now he vanishes into thin air!") do not differ much from those previously enacted by Larry in the same episode—after Larry has left her, she enters a strip club to watch a Chip 'n' Dale's show: "Hey, Dale," you cry, "these are for you!" [throwing her panties onto the stage]—Patti functions as an ironic Larry-like gendered caricature, but also as a sexual instrument that enables players to "give blowjobs" and experiment with provocative actions that if tried with Larry would provoke very different responses. Meanwhile, Patti faces re-objectifying humiliation such as being literally exposed to the player's (and the surrounding characters') gaze in *Leisure Suit Larry 5: Passionate Patti Does a Little Undercover Work* (Sierra Entertainment, 1991), as she accidentally ends up naked in a glass elevator, which does not, on the surface at least, differ much from Larry's repeated

embarrassment as he frequently finds himself undressed in public places.[5]

Once more, the depiction, treatment, and (re)presentation of sexuality in ludic culture, like that surrounding *Larry*, operates on multiple levels. An interpretation of any *Larry* as a sexist adventure game would be a simplification, as while it does certainly deal with such foci, it happens in ways that are hardly consistent or logical, but rather, particularly (and sometimes problematically) *playful*. This playfulness, again, surely coheres with the era's masculine discourse of computers and their play (Kirkpatrick), but it also challenges the discourse by diverging from norms and explicitly calling that very masculinity into question.

Larry through Incongruity Theory

An early account of humor's *incongruity theory* comes from Immanuel Kant, who specifies that the incongruity between expectation and result that triggers laughter is "an affect arising from a strained expectation being suddenly reduced to nothing" (161). In response to the above, Arthur Schopenhauer asserts: "In every case, laughter results from nothing but the suddenly perceived incongruity between a concept and the real objects that had been thought through it in some relation; and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity" (59). Accordingly, incongruity works best when it cues in expectations but accentuates a difference in departing from the expected, although the (re)solution might confirm an even more unexpected similarity. Jokes do not always require the listener to supply the response, but they do engage the listener's puzzle-solving participation by cueing in particular expectations that will then be overturned or diverted in some way. In Morreall's words, jokes actively mislead their audience (a tactic shared with puzzles) to experience a "cognitive shift" predicated on a difference between the set-up and the punchline.

If the punchline suggests a triumph of cognitive shift, the opening onto laughter also brings with it a cathartic release that may be a kind of closure through satisfaction. As the joke ends in resolution, the satisfaction that comes at the end of the joke-structure may remind us of a sexual climax; moreover, it also

bears significant comparison with the completion of the riddle that "ceases to exist" (Pagis) or laughter arising from "expectation" transformed "into nothing" (Kant). Puns and other kinds of wordplay common to both riddles and jokes thus depend on a highlighted incongruity resting in hesitation or ambiguity. This is often resolved in a surprising convergence; a pleasing, seeming coincidence that may be shown finally to confirm appropriateness and coherence where the two terms might be revealed to have more in common than initially expected.

There is obvious incongruity between Larry's expectations and those of many of the women he encounters, operating within different frames of reference that converge at certain key points, allowing the expectation to be sustained a while longer. For example, in *Larry 7* a black screen greets Larry's drop from a ventilation shaft into an unlit room; slurping noises and suggestive groans and moans assail the ears; various "fleshy" and "sticky" "stuff" can be "felt" for a variety of suggestive comments; Larry and (possibly) the player misread the situation; Larry "undresses" and announces his arrival; the light goes on to reveal Larry standing inappropriately nude in the middle of a Blind Dessert Taste Test; he again misreads this—"[inner voice] that was close! [aloud] It's nice to see the sight-challenged having a good time" (this second misreading is less likely to be shared by the player, as safe distance is re-established)—he is unceremoniously ejected from the room (Figure 4).

The above scene with a fiction puzzle ("guess the right action") draws attention to the point-and-click interface. With all graphics but the (condomized) cursor and command options removed, the player's primary tool is the tactile "feel" through which the player's clicks emulate Larry's curious and awkward prods as he and the player seek out the right spot to click. Eventually, the very hotspot turns out to be Larry himself (addressed as "you"). But in the blacked-out space, Larry's ("your") own body can be hard to find—a spatial disorientation that affects the player and functions to heighten the ambiguity and uncertainty that precedes the epiphany—such ambiguities being common to riddles and certain jokes (Kaivola-Bregenhøj, "Riddles and Humor" 197). The epiphanic moment, however, is also a sudden derailing, as laughter replaces sex: the player is allowed to derive enjoyment (restoring distance) from the dissolution of Larry's hopes.

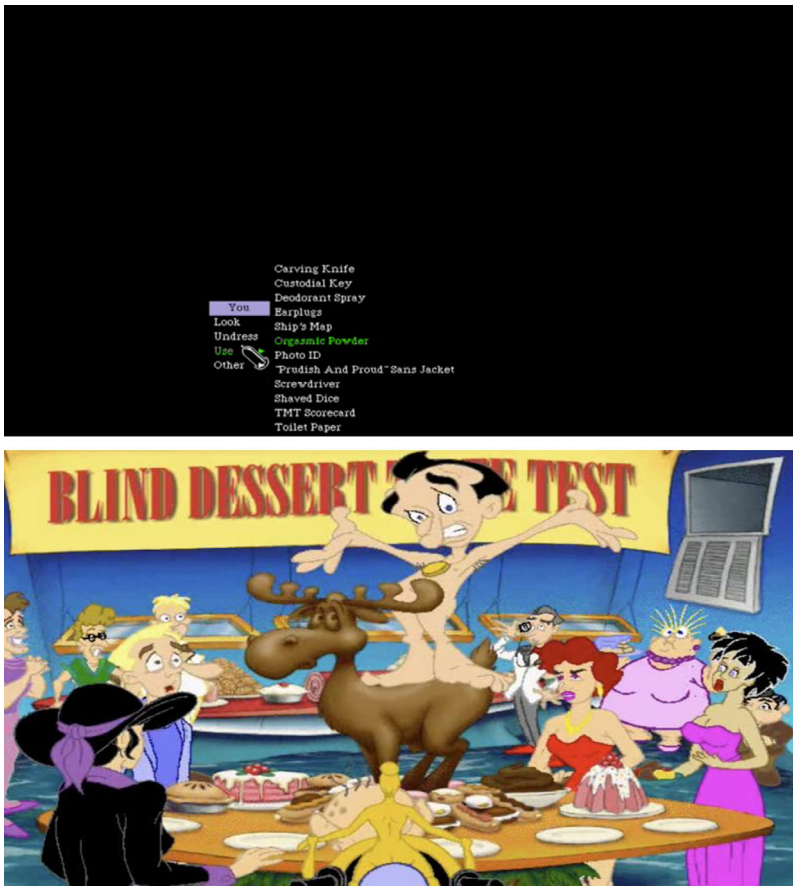

FIGURE 4. Above the darkness and Larry's (player's) attempt to feel, which lightens (below) into a moment of Larry's (player's?) embarrassment. *Larry 7: Love for Sail!* (Sierra Entertainment, 1996). [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

At the very end of *Larry 3*, Patti finds her runaway lover on an island inhabited by amazon lesbian cannibals (*the* place for Larry's celibate life). As the couple gets captured and caged, their misunderstandings clear up and the incongruities in their relationship resolve. In order to proceed to the happy ending, the player still needs to find a way for the two to escape; and there is of course no rational solution, but one must command Patti to "draw a door" with her "magic

marker" (she apparently managed to carry it all the way through the story in her bra). Patti and Larry enter the magical door and fall into an abyss that leads them directly to their makers in the Sierra Online studios. In this metaleptic ending, Patti and Larry meet the actual head of the studio, Roberta Williams, who is "shooting" a scene for her adventure game *King's Quest 4: The Perils of Rosella* (1988).

In the actual scene from *King's Quest 4*, the protagonist Rosella has been eaten by a whale and the player must find a way for her to escape (by climbing the slippery mouth and tickling the uvula). In that original context, the setting is very asexual, with the fully clothed heroine enacting her gender-bent biblical role in a whale's mouth. As Larry and Patti enter the "shootings" of the scene in *Larry 3*, the emerging incongruence is tangible. This is due not only to the meta-layered narrative structuring, but also to *Larry*'s sexual thematics that urge the player to reconstrue meaning with such suggestive frame in mind.

Even though this last screen does not present any materially inhibiting fiction puzzles, its parodic visual imagery and verbal discourse ("I don't know, Larry, but that girl certainly seems tired of going down on that tongue") still synergize with the player's "erotic interpretation" that, over the past multiple hours of play, has been refined into a key to ludic progress. In this light, the final resolution emerges as an anticlimax of sorts: Patti and Larry are instantly hired to design and write adventure games about their ventures for Sierra —the very same adventures that the player has just finished. As the ending surely makes for a postmodern (non-)closure, it also leaves the player with renewed incongruence on which the subsequent episodes continue to build their sexual tension. The story, on the open narrative level, remains a puzzle to be solved (Figure 5).

Conclusions

Puzzles and humor coincide to build tension between likeness and incongruity that provokes laughter. While variants of this *enigmatic synergy* have been present in human culture for centuries through witty riddling and perplexing jokes, popular culture has come to introduce new genres that explicitly foster the phenomenon; first and

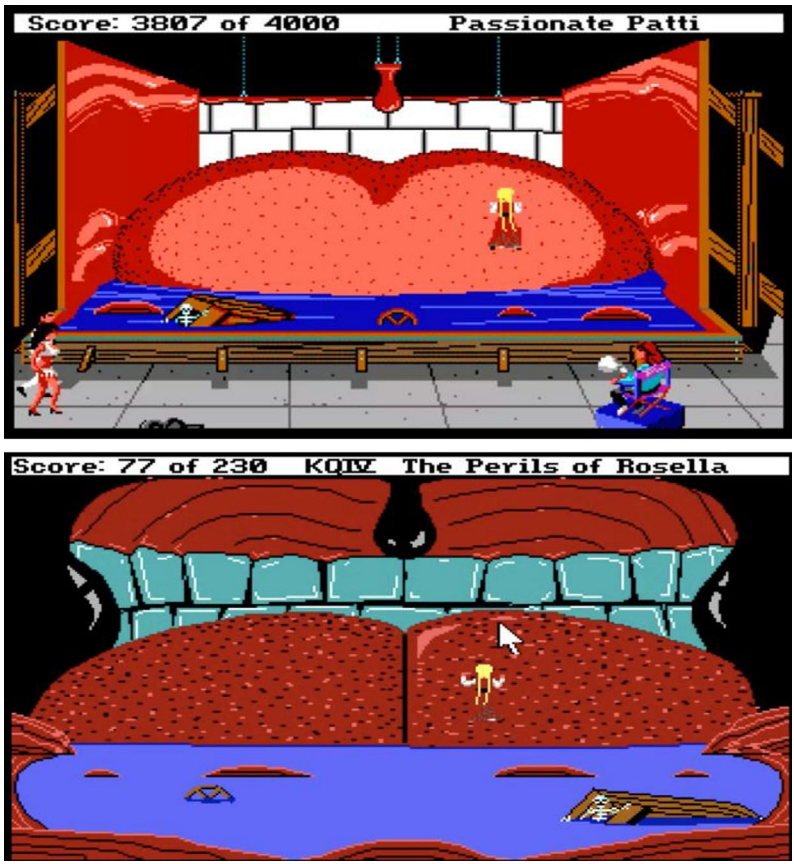

FIGURE 5. *Rosella in her original environment (below) and the exposed setting with Patti and Larry (above)*. King's Quest 4: The Perils of Rosella *(Sierra Entertainment, 1988)*, Leisure Suit Larry 3: Passionate Patti in Pursuit of the Pulsating Pectorals *(Sierra Entertainment, 1989)*. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

foremost, the adventure game that challenges its players with fiction puzzles and humor. In order to provide evidence for this in practice, *Leisure Suit Larry*, with specific focus on its thematics of sexuality, provides a fitting case study.

This analysis exemplifies how the three major approaches to humor (superiority, relief, incongruity) operate on principles very similar to those of puzzle and riddle theories. In *Larry*, the simultaneous

incorporation of fiction puzzles and sexual humor produces enigmatic synergy that is aesthetic and playful through mutual dependence: without one, the other would not work. This partially explains why the adventure game (more than other videogames and many other cultural genres) relies on humor as its core means of expression; namely, solving fiction puzzles shares a strong correspondence with deciphering and grasping humor. Adventure games, with fiction puzzles as their main challenge, are naturally suited to deal with their themes through the comic.

Enigmatic synergy, as described, is not the sole reason for humor's dominance in the adventure game. Obviously, contextual economic and sociocultural factors such as the demographics of the genre's original target audience (e.g., teenagers, young adults, tech students) may have a significant role to play here. That said, the ways in which adventure games like *Larry* employ humor should not be dismissed as childish jesting, despite the fact that a certain gleeful silliness remains a potential allure.

Not unlike erotic riddling and puzzles that have enabled humans to discuss various topics playfully throughout history, the interplay between *Larry*'s fiction puzzles and humor makes a unique case of ludic expression: sexuality is turned into a problem to be solved. While this problematization is occasionally sexist, stereotypical, and heteronormative by design, it also makes systematic fun of this; the character of Larry himself being presented as a (para)sexual antihero and an ironic means for mediating sexual humor and puzzlement. In this rubric, the key to reflecting on *Larry* as mediated and technologically empowered culture rests in its enigmatic synergy, through which sexuality surfaces as a form of *play* both in the comic and the ludic.

Notes

We thank all reviewers and Turku media studies seminar members for their valuable feedback. A presentation of the study was also given at the annual DiGRA conference in 2018, which resulted in plenty of comments that helped us make this a better article. Thank you. Funding was received from two Academy of Finland projects (312397, 309382).

1. Many recent successful titles such as *Heavy Rain* (Quantic Dream, 2010), *L.A. Noire* (Team Bondi, 2011), *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room, 2012), *The Walking Dead* (Telltale Games, 2012), and *Gone Home* (The Fulbright Company, 2013) often get classified as adventure games, yet they lack explicit humor. While this could be interpreted as a shift in design

(adventure game designers have learned to address topics via non-comic means), they also involve a clear mechanical shift—these titles do not rely on puzzles anymore, but rather on action and navigational wandering. The fact is in coherence with this article's argument: successful integration of non-comic expression seems to entail removing puzzles, which excludes these works from the "adventure game" specifications adopted here.

2. The complete list is available at https://adventuregamers.com/articles/view/18643. Here, "systematic review" means the authors having played eighty-nine out of the one hundred adventure games in the list and examined the eleven remaining titles via second hand sources such as databases, reviews, and walkthroughs. Naturally, "explicit humor" is based on subjective judgement.
3. There is another possible ending that may be discovered: walking into the sunset with the male towel attendant. This ending can be attained at any point; though it is a valid ending, it is presented as more of a surprise ("Easter egg") than as closure due to short-circuiting progression.
4. The later *Larry* episodes removed the possibility of death; in the earlier installments, the capacity to bounce back by reloading an earlier saved state is implicit within the narrative itself. In *Larry 2*, for example, the protagonist gets the opportunity to ask where he went wrong before dying horribly—information that cannot benefit the ill-fated Larry of this playthrough but that will carry over into the reloaded state through the player, who therefore has more privileged awareness than any other incarnation of Larry. Yet, the Larry that finally "wins" has done so by benefiting from the player's knowledge; there are certain fiction puzzles in the first three *Larry* episodes that only become known after a death, such as finding a means to avoid a venereal disease (*Larry 1*) and throughout Larry's devising of a disguise (*Larry 2*). The first *Larry* is exceptional in mixing purely tragic death scenes in with more farcically slapstick ones; and indeed, there is one that comes as the ultimate end: if Larry is still a virgin at the end of eight hours of play, he puts a gun to his head and the possibilities for rebound have run out with the time. The consequences, for the player too, are graver; given the time factor, the last saved state is unlikely to suffice and one may be forced to restart from scratch.
5. However, there is a gendered difference: Patti is shown as a sexual object (characters lean out of windows to ogle), where Larry is shown as a comical object of disgust (Figure 4).

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Veli-Matti Karhulahti is currently an adjunct professor in University of Turku and a senior researcher in University of Jyväskylä. He primarily aims to better understand the role play in diverse cultures and human development.

Krista Bonello Rutter Giappone is a Visiting Senior Lecturer at the University of Malta, and a Research Fellow with the Centre for Critical Thought at the University of Kent. She is currently also designing a video games module for San Francisco State University, and coediting the volume *Video Games and Comedy* (Palgrave Macmillan).