The Quest for Serious Sex Adventures: A Structural Analysis of Puzzle and Humor

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INTRODUCTION

Studies have repeatedly observed the comical excess in the so-called classic adventure game genre. The hacker humor of the original *Adventure* (Jerz 2007; Lessard 2013), the technical jokes of the subsequent text-adventure era (Yorke-Smith 2002; Montfort 2003), the witty design of later point-and-click adventures (Fernández-Vara 2009; Black 2012) and the self-reflexive parody that oversees the evolution of the genre to our days (Bonello Rutter Giappone 2015) have all been mapped out throughout the years. But why is this comic excess, in its various and diverse forms, typical of the classic adventure game genre in particular? Moreover, what are its implications for adventure game thematics and sensitive themes such as sexuality in general? This paper sets out to answer the first question and thence hypothesize answers to the second questions through the following chain of argumentation:

Premise 1:   The nature of challenge in classic adventure games is heavily reliant on puzzles.

Premise 2:   Puzzles and jokes operate on similar structural principles.

Conclusion: Since classic adventure games rely on puzzles, and puzzles resonate with humor, it is logical for the designers to favor humor as a thematic component.

Our understanding of the classic adventure game, in concert with the previously cited scholars and many others (e.g. Pias 2004; Douglass 2007; Salter 2010), grounds the genre's specific challenge in the structure of puzzles. Hence, we do not discuss *Premise 1* further here but accept it as an established assumption in the present context.

The principal contribution of this article lies in providing a reasonable theoretical basis for *Premise 2*. Here, our point of departure is a wide-ranging review of puzzle theory, from those of early riddles (Kaivola-Bregenhøj 1996; Pagis 1996) and analog puzzles (Bryant 1983; Danesi 2002) to the modern fiction puzzles of videogames (Crawford 1984; Karhulahti 2013). A unifying factor in these is the dual nature of the structure of

such puzzles, one side being open to exploration and observation, and the other to be accessed via deduction and interpretation. Pagis (1996) offers a 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 riddlee. … The moment the riddle is completed, it also ceases to exist. (83–84)

Interestingly, as an elaboration of this structure, Danesi (2002) tentatively suggests that the "puzzle instinct is comparable to what might be called our instinct for humor" (35). In agreement with the analogy, Karhulahti (2013) proposes that puzzles in videogames tend to be "supporting the game's fanciful themes [and] a thematic coherence with the narrative is vital for a strengthening effect to take place" (214).

The structural components of the above puzzle theories are largely consistent with those of humor and jokes. For instance, the recurring pattern of a set-up followed by a surprise, delivered through a striking and sudden contrast—even the popular 'rule of three' structurally pivots on one turning-point (see Double, 2005, 207-8). Likewise, the standard 'Pull Back and Reveal' formula depends on a surprise or turnaround, uncovered in the punch-line (see Stewart Lee 2010, 197). Puns and other kinds of wordplay also depend upon a highlighted incongruity, but often tend to resolve this in a surprising convergence, a pleasing seeming coincidence that is shown, finally, to confirm appropriateness and coherence (see Attridge 1988, 201), where the two terms might be revealed to have more in common than expected at first. In these cases, where the joke ends in resolution, the 'satisfaction' that comes at the end of the joke-structure (Zupančič 2008, 136-137) bears significant comparison with the completion of the riddle that 'ceases to exist', in Pagis' terms.

The above-shown structural resonance between puzzles and humor rationalizes the classic adventure game's comical treatment of its themes: since the players (and designers) of the genre appear to enjoy puzzle solving, they should also value the hermeneutic resolutions of the comic.

The above finding also paves the way for an advanced comprehension of what is persistently addressed as gaming's general "lack of seriousness"—though it suggests, alongside this, the possibility of a more critical approach through comedy too (cf. Flanagan 2009). With specific reference to the classic adventure game and its thematic treatment of sexuality, our examples explicitly foreground both humor and sexuality. We suggest that the theme of sexuality (in puzzle-heavy adventures generally and our examples particularly) tends to be brought to the fore through humor: thematically given comic treatment inhabiting the puzzle-riddle-joke structure. Our examples are *2064: Read Only Memories* (MidBoss 2015, 2017), the *Deponia* series (Daedalic Entertainment 2012-2016), the *Leisure Suit Larry* series (Sierra Entertainment/High Voltage Software/Team17/Replay Games 1987-2013), and *Leather Goddesses of Phobos* (Infocom 1986).

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