The Ambiguity of Casual Game Parodies

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Abstract: This article analyzes three casual game parodies (*Cow Clicker*, *A.V.G.M.* and *Progress War*) which mock the simplistic challenges and the behavioural reward system of casual games like *FarmVille*. In light of theories on parody, their visual elements, gameplay, and paratexts are analyzed to evaluate their critical potential. The comments posted by their players on forums and blogs, for their part, show that many of them do not detect the irony of these parodies or do not identify their target. In the discussion section, Bogost's theory on the efficiency of procedural rhetoric is therefore nuanced with the idea that it should be complemented by an appropriate visual and textual rhetoric for it to work properly. The article also questions the subversive potential of the studied parodies by highlighting the fact that they do not only denigrate the simplistic and manipulative mechanics of casual games, but also the women players to whom these games are primarily addressed and who are still, to this day, marginalized in the gaming culture. The article finally develops the idea that casual game parodies lost their subversive appeal since they multiplied and evolved into a video game genre devoid of critical intent called "clicker games", "idle games" or "incremental games".

Keywords: video game, genre, parody, casual game, casual gamer, FarmVille, incremental game, idle game, clicker game, women player

Résumé en français à la fin de l'article

In recent years, casual games have surged to become one of the largest sub-sectors in the gaming industry. The farm-simulation social network game *FarmVille* (Zynga, 2009), for example, reached 80 million monthly active users at its peak (Hameed, 2010) and one billion in sales of virtual goods (Kanal, 2013). In the wake of this impressive success, harsh criticisms of casual games have flooded in from all sides. *Time* magazine described *FarmVille* as one of the "50 Worst Inventions" of the past decade due to it being "the most addictive of Facebook games" and a "series of mindless chores on a digital farm." (Fletcher, 2010) Sam Anderson (2012), from the *New York Times*, wrote : "*Tetris* and its offspring (*Angry Birds*, *Bejeweled*, *Fruit Ninja*, etc.) have colonized our pockets and our brains and shifted the entire economic model of the video-game industry. Today we are living, for better and worse, in a world of stupid games." (cited by Anable, 2013) Scholar Ian Bogost (2011), for his part, argued that casual games perfectly illustrate what is "kitsch" in the video game world. The remarkable rise in popularity of casual games has also fuelled feelings of annoyance within the gamer community (Juul, 2010, p. 26). Some players even went as far as to say that "casual games" are not "real" games and "casual gamers" not "real" gamers (Sulzdorf-Liszkiewicz, 2010). Along with these direct criticisms, some game designers created casual game parodies to denounce their simplistic mechanics and easy challenges that require minimal skills, but tremendous investment of time.

In this article, I analyze three of these casual game parodies (*Cow Clicker*, *A.V.G.M.* and *Progress War*), which are based on a similar procedural rhetoric, and show how their criticism is ambiguous. Drawing on theories of parody, I examine their visual elements, game mechanics, and paratexts to evaluate their critical potential. I also analyze hundreds of comments posted by their players on forums, blogs and websites to see how they were interpreted and to assess the success or failure of their parodic communication. These analyses reveal that textual and paratextual elements affect the critical potential of their procedural rhetoric, and that not all players acknowledge their critical agenda or identify their target. In the discussion section, I therefore argue that procedural rhetoric is not sufficient to convey a parodic criticism efficiently. I also question these parodies' subversive potential by highlighting the fact that they do not only target simplistic game mechanics, overly mobilized by multimillionaire corporations, but also indirectly mock the people who play them, that is to say a predominantly female clientele which is, to this day, marginalized in the gaming culture. I finally suggest that the subversive potential of these casual game parodies has weakened since they proliferated and

evolved into a video game genre. However, before getting into the heart of the matter, I provide a definition of what I mean by "parody" and by "casual game", since the significance of these categories is often debated.

A Definition of Parody

A parody is a "form of repetition with ironic critical distance, marking difference rather than similarity" (Hutcheon,1985, p. xii) with the help of techniques such as reiteration, inversion, misdirection[1], literalization[2], extraneous inclusion, exaggeration, recontextualization, etc. (Harries, 2000). Many scholars consider parody as a "genre", that is to say a category of media productions that share similarities in terms of style, content or operating rules (Genette, 1982; Hannoosh, 1989; Sangsue, 1994). Because a parody can target various genres, the idea that it can be a genre itself is, however, a contradiction in terms. As Schaeffer (1986) and Bakhtin (1978) explain, parody resists all forms of classification based on style, content or operating rules, because its style, content and operating rules change according to the nature of its target. For this reason, I prefer to consider parody as a discursive form based on a dialectic between two processes: the imitation and transformation of elements that characterize a specific type of discourse (a text, a game, a genre, a current, etc.). These two processes are deeply intertwined in parody techniques: exaggeration involves the repetition of a familiar element with a difference in terms of degree, while recontextualization implies the repetition of a conventional element in a different context (Trépanier-Jobin, 2013). Since genres are based on a fragile balance between the repetition of the same conventions within a group of texts and the inclusion of slight differences from a text to another, the *modus operandi* of a genre parody is to break this delicate equilibrium in order to highlight genre conventions and show how artificial and redundant they are. Parody techniques such as literalization and exaggeration push the targeted genre conventions in their conservative zone to shed light on them, while parody techniques like inversion, misdirection, and extraneous inclusion push the targeted conventions in their innovative zone to show how different they could be if creators were not all banking on the same model (Trépanier-Jobin, 2013).

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[1] The sudden transformation of something familiar.
[2] The act of making explicit something that is usually implicit.

Parodies are often associated with comedies, but the original meaning of the Greek term παρῳδία [*parôdia*] (παρά [*pará*] = "beside" or "against" and ᾠδή [*ôdé*] = "song") does not evoke the idea of a comical discourse (Hutcheon, 1985, p. 32). If parodies tend to be funny, it is mostly because laughter also relies on processes such as imitation and transformation, repetition and difference[3] (Trépanier-Jobin, 2013). Even though laughter is a common effect of parody, my definition of this discursive form does not include the comical aspect because it is not a necessary criterion to consider a production as a parody. Furthermore, parody is different from what has been called "clone" in the game industry. Clones are "derivative products" of a game with new skins but same gameplay (Arsenault, 2009). They are not made to create a reference to the game that inspired them, but to capitalize on its popularity and to generate meaning on their own. In contrast, parodies are intended as commentaries on their target and only make sense in relation to it. While film, television and book parodies imitate and transform their target's lexicon, syntax or style (Harries, 2000), video game parodies additionally imitate and transform their target's gameplay elements, that is to say their rules, mechanics, and goals. Their commentary or criticism therefore partly relies on what Ian Bogost (2007) calls "procedural rhetoric", which is the art of persuasion through procedures and program codes, rather than textual or visual elements.

The Ambivalence of Parody

Parody is often considered as an ambivalent media form that can either pay tribute to its target or criticize it, as indicated by the double meaning of its prefix "para" which can mean "beside" or "against". A parody is at once close and far from its target, and simultaneously the result of admiration and disregard. As Margaret Rose (1993), Michelle Hannoosh (1989) and Linda Hutcheon (1985) point out, the most admiring parody still involves critical distance and desacralizes its target, while the most irreverent parody still acknowledges the authority or the importance of its target. The imitation or repetition process is generally seen as the conservative aspect of a parody, while the transformation or differentiation process is conceived as the

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[3] According to incongruity theory, developed by Kant, Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard, laughter happens when people's expectations are overturned because there is a surprising discrepancy between what they anticipate and what actually occurs (Morreall, 1987). For Bergson (1940, p. 29), on the other hand, we laugh when there is "something mechanical in something living"; when someone, for example, constantly repeats the same gesture or imitates someone else, when two people look alike, or when similar series of events occur in different situations. Although these two theories on laughter are often presented as opposites, we can consider the mechanization of life as an instance of incongruity. As Bergson mentions, such cases are funny because we expect people to be flexible, and unpredictable (1940, p. 8).

innovative and subversive aspect of this discursive form (Hutcheon, 1985, p. 77). As we saw earlier, these two processes are, however, constantly intertwined, which confers to parodies a continuous ambivalence between consolidation and innovation.

Among the numerous criticisms addressed to this media form features its degrading function: that is to say its demeaning of high-end discourses which deserve to be respected. From this perspective, parody is only relevant when it mocks the weaknesses of a production or the recurrent stereotypes of a genre (Sangsue, 1994, p. 26-29). Others are suspicious of parody because its irony masks its misleading intentions under the cover of laughter (Barthes 1973, p. 19) or gives the false impression that the parody is superior to its target (Barthes, 1970, p. 51-52). From this point of view, parodies are only pertinent when they attack their target without pretending to be smarter and when they criticize the canonical structures of their own language (Barthes, 1970, p. 146 and 212). Finally, parodies are sometimes accused of being elitist: that is to say inaccessible to the average receiver who is not equipped to perceive their underlying message (Sangsue, 1994, p. 85). However, this position itself is elitist since it presupposes that the average receiver is unable to read double-voiced discourses. It also fails to acknowledge that some parodies prevent hermeticism by mobilizing different strategies at the textual or paratextual levels.

Despite all these criticisms, several scholars confer positive functions to certain parodies. The Russian formalists, for instance, highlight their regenerative force, that is to say their capacity to alleviate the natural mechanization, sclerosis and decay of literary devices (Chklovski 1973; Tomachevski, 1925). In the same vein, Harries (2000) considers genre parody as a modernization tool. According to him, Hollywood genres are constantly reworked and updated under the influence of parodies. However, parodies do not deeply reform their targeted genre: they only free it from its outdated conventions and give it a fresh boost so it can persist over time: "film parody can be seen as a source of renewal by breathing new life into worn-out canons without specifically burying that tradition." (2000, p. 123) Robert Phiddian, for his part, compares parody to Jacques Derrida's deconstruction method: both demonstrate that all texts are caught up in a network of citations, imitations and appropriations (1997, p. 680). According to Phiddian, parodies rely on the *différance* that separates them from their target. While the word *différance* was created by Derrida (1972) to describe the idea that each sign carries traces

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of the different meanings that were attributed to them in the past, Phiddian believes that this term applies to parodies better than to any other types of discourse.

> A parody brings out the possibility of its own ridicule in a text. It is the deconstruction which is always available. It comes from the margins of a preexisting text or discourse, supplementing it dangerously : giving it what it lacks (its own implicit critique), giving it what it deserves (a vision of its own absurdity), and taking its place (decentering it and overcoming it). (Phiddian, 1997, p. 689)

Some parodies also have a political function when they attack the cultural codes, values and ideologies embodied by their target. This is why parody became one of the marginalized's preferred tools to contest sexist, racist, colonialist or capitalist ideologies (Phiddian, 1997, p. 692).

In light of these theories, we can hypothesize that *Cow Clicker*, *A.V.G.M.* and *Progress Wars* highlight the imitative nature of casual games, denounce their profit-oriented strategies, and encourage developers to renew their model. We can, however, suspect that they are not equally subversive and that part of their critical potential relies on their ability to convey their message efficiently. Since parodic criticisms can only operate with the collaboration of their interpreters, it is important to pinpoint the conditions that favour the success of parodic communication.

The Reception of a Parody

Identifying the target and inferring the irony of the parodist are two necessary conditions for a parody to be interpreted as such (Harries, 2000, p. 34). The repetition of the target's characteristics generally helps the receiver to identify the parodied text, while the inclusion of differences allows the detection of the parodist's irony. The acknowledgement of the parody's target or irony can be particularly tricky when the producer and the receiver do not share the same repertoire of knowledge and cultural references. The success of a parody also relies on the presence, in its texts or paratexts, of clues about the parody's target or the parodist's intention (Harries, 2000, p. 105). As Sangsue explains, the titles, subtitles, credits or any other peripheric texts are preferred areas to establish a reading contract with the interpreter (2006, p. 18). The film parody *This Is Spinal Tap* (Reiner, 1984), for example, integrates this explicit mention in its credits: "For anyone who thought the preceding Greatest Hits commercial was real... IT

WASN'T. The aforementioned record does not exist. Neither does Spinal Tap. And there's no Easter Bunny, either!" Titles of film parodies such as *Airplane!, Top Secret!, Mafia!* and *Hot Shots!* include exclamation points to indicate the ironical nature of the movies. In video games, clues can be found in interfaces, environments or narratives, as well as in credits, instructions, or advertisements. With the help of these clues, receivers who are not familiar with the parody's target can still detect the irony of the parodist and partly understand the parody's commentary or criticism.

A Definition of Casual Games

The label "casual game" commonly refers to a broad category of games played on different devices including console games, computer games, social games played on *Facebook*, and mobile games played on cellphones or tablets. Jesper Juul identifies five components that are common to "casual games": 1) emotionally positive fictions (excluding anything that concerns warfare), 2) high usability (they do not require extensive gaming skill or specific knowledge), 3) interruptibility (they can be played for short periods of time), 4) merciful punishments (that do not involve losing progress and replaying large portions of the game after failing), and 5) juiciness (the constant rewarding of successful action with excessive positive feedback) (2010, p. 50). As Juul (2010) mentions, the labels "casual" and "hardcore" games are, however, problematic. Contrary to popular belief, what is considered as casual games can be as time consuming as what is regarded as hardcore games. Moreover, some casual games, such as *Guitar Hero* (RedOctane, 2005), can be played seriously in the context of a competition, while some hardcore games, such as *Grand Theft Auto* (Rockstar, 1997), can be played casually when the player explores their open-world without completing the missions. Nonetheless, casual games are generally more flexible and accessible to a wider range of people than "hardcore games", because they can be played casually or not (Juul, 2010, p. 54).

The label "casual games" does not refer to a video game genre, because it encompasses various game genres such as puzzle games, simulation games and exploration games. Indeed, video game genres are different from film or television genres that are based on family resemblance in terms of semantic (topics, iconography), syntactic (narrative structure, relation between characters, etc.) or stylistic elements (film techniques, aesthetic, etc.) (Altman, 1999). Instead, they mostly rely on similarities in terms of gameplay, that is to say the challenges that players

face, the actions they must perform, and the goals they pursue (Apperley, 2006; Arsenault, 2010; Wolf, 2001). This is why journalists, publishers and players use labels such as "strategy games", "role-playing games" and "shooting games" instead of labels like "western games" or "spy games" in order to refer to video game genres.

The three parodies analyzed in this article target a subcategory of casual games like *FarmVille* (Zynga, 2009) that does not have a designated label. Some people use the term "clicker" to qualify them, but, as I will explain later, this expression was initially used to designate their parodies before being recycled to describe games that involve minimal interaction. In this article, I therefore use the expression "casual games *à-la FarmVille*" –for lack of a better term– to refer to a casual game genre in which the player simply has to click on items to accomplish complex tasks, gain points, collect virtual goods, and level up. These games can be related to diverse topics and iconographies, but all of them generally have simple graphics and mechanics. They are based on constant positive reinforcement and designed to be played during short and interruptable periods of time (between work tasks and domestic obligations for instance). They are addressed to so-called "casual gamers" and are generally browser or app-based. Most of them are available for free or sold at a very cheap price. However, they frequently involve monetization techniques that trick players into purchasing in-game currency or digital items with real money (Nieborg, 2016; Whitson, 2011). *FarmVille*, for instance, was available on the social network *Facebook* for free. Its players were required to plant seeds, water them, wait for them to grow, feed animals, collect their products and cook them, by repeatedly clicking on digital icons. They could sell the collected or cooked food to gain "Farm coins" that could be used to buy more equipment or animals, as well as bigger lots. They could also visit the farms of their *Facebook* friends and buy virtual items with real money. As the most emblematic game of the genre, *FarmVille* has often been mocked and criticized. The parody *Cow Clicker* is one of the most elaborated attempts to poke fun at its simplistic clicking mechanic and to denounce its "freemium" business model revolving around microtransactions.

An Analysis of *Cow Clicker* and Its Reception

Like many game scholars and game designers, Ian Bogost (2010) is critical of casual games with simplistic mechanics, behaviourist reward systems[4], and manipulative monetization techniques. To express his distaste for this kind of game through a medium that could reach those who are playing them, Bogost created the game parody *Cow Clicker*, in the summer of 2010, and published it on *Facebook*.
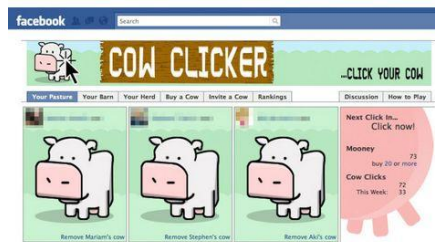

Image 1: Screen capture of *Cow Clicker*
(Source: https://www.qwant.com/game/cow-clicker?l=br)

This absurd game required players to click on a cute cow once every six hours, in order to win points called "Cow clicks" that could eventually be used to buy more clickable cows! To skip the six hours waiting period between two clicks, players could purchase a virtual currency called "Mooney".[5] They could also invite *Facebook* friends to join their pasture and click on their friends' cow to obtain more Cow clicks and try to reach the top of the leaderboard.

In his essay "*Cow Clicker*: The Making of Obsession"[6], published on his blog, Bogost (2010) describes his game as a "*Facebook* game on *Facebook* games", and as a "satire" (although one that meets my criteria of parody[7]) that criticizes four aspects of social games like *FarmVille*: 1) *enframing*: the instrumentalizing of social ties and the exploitation of *Facebook* friends as resources to be optimized; 2) *compulsion*: the behavioural nature of gaming systems that reward minimal effort with trivial digital items; 3) *optionalism*: the possibility of avoiding play by

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[4] The behaviourist reward system is inspired by Skinner's operant conditing chamber (also known as the Skinner box); a device used to teach a subject animal to perform specific actions (press a lever) in response to a stimuli (light or sound) by delivering a reward (food) each time the action is executed correctly.

[5] Bogost claims that the name of the currency was not an intended reference to Zynga's vice-president of the time, Bill Mooney.

[6] http://bogost.com/writing/blog/cow_clicker_1/

[7] Satire is often confused with parody, as these discursive forms operate in a similar fashion. However, satire targets various social practices such as customs, traditions, myths, social stereotypes, politics, religions, etc., while parodies aim at discourses, representations, and media material (Rose, 1993).

spending real money; and 4) *destroyed time*: the guilt that players feel when they do not play the game and miss opportunities. After its release, *Cow Clicker* was played by a bunch of fans who clicked on cows in protest of casual games *à-la FarmVille*, but within a few weeks, more than 50,000 players were more earnestly clicking on Bogost's cute cows (Bogost, 2010). The game was no longer played ironically by a handful of insiders, and unexpectedly became a commercial success. Faced with the growing popularity of his game, Bogost (2010) could not resist the temptation to create new content and to expand the scale of his project. To maximize interactions between players, he added the possibility to publish feed stories about clicking on a cow that could themselves be clicked to gain Cow clicks. He released an application allowing players to click on their cow via mobile devices, provided funny premium cows (such as the Bacon Cow, the Oil Cow, the Mao Cow, the Bling Cow, etc.) in exchange for micropayments, and added virtual items that could only be bought with a ridiculously high amount of Cow clicks or with real money.

Image 2: Screenshot of *Cow Clicker* premium cows
(Source: https://www.coolbuster.net/2010/07/cow-clicker.html)

By pushing monetization techniques to an extreme, Bogost (2010) was hoping that people would stop playing the game. However, each time he added new items and functionalities, players sent positive feedback and played the game with even more enthusiasm. Eventually, enhancing the game became an obsession for Bogost (2010) who later admitted that he had fallen foul of his own trap.

The procedural rhetoric of *Cow Clicker* was based on parodic exaggerations of the genre's common rule-based elements such as the wait time between clicks, the number of clicks required to obtain a virtual item, and the cost of virtual items in real money. By exaggerating these gameplay elements, the parody showed how trivial and manipulative the rules of this

game genre are. At the semantic level, the parody literalized the "clicking" game mechanic by using the expression "Cow clicks" to designate the game's points. At the stylistic level, *Cow Clicker* reiterated the vivid colour palette of most casual games and created a direct reference to *FarmVille* with its cute cow icon and logo. These parody techniques, mostly based on repetition, are in theory supposed to shed light on the targeted genre conventions while helping the players to identify the parody's target. Overall, *Cow Clicker* reiterated and amplified many elements of its targeted genre without transforming them substantially. Moreover, the publication of this game parody on the same social network as its target did not recontextualize the genre conventions and distance the parody from games like *FarmVille*. We can therefore hypothesize that the difference between the parody and its target was not significant enough to convince all players that *Cow Clicker* was an ironical parody. The fact that it mobilized more parody techniques based on imitation than parody techniques relying on transformation might have increased the risk of confusion with the parodied genre. *Cow Clicker* is a good example of games that heavily rely on procedural rhetoric to make a point. Aside from literalizing the target's clicking game mechanic in the game's title and points, the innovative aspect of *Cow Clicker* is almost entirely based on the exaggeration of the "clicking" mechanic.

As for its paratextual elements, the title of the game makes a direct reference to *FarmVille* by evoking the cow, while literalizing the "clicking" game mechanic. Yet, there were no clear indications of Bogost's parodic intent in its subtitle, instructions or promotional texts. On the game's *Facebook* page, Bogost included a link towards a website[8] that explains in detail the intention behind the game, but we can suspect that not all players clicked on it.

As Bogost (2010) reported on his blog, several players considered the game to be stupid and boring because they did not perceive it as a parody of casual games. Many others enjoyed playing *Cow Clicker* even though they did not detect its irony. I tried to understand why this game became so popular and was played for its own sake, despite Bogost's intention to create the most boring game ever made in order to raise consciousness about the problematic aspects of casual games *à-la FarmVille*. An analysis of players' comments, posted below Bogost's explanatory essay[9], offers clues as to why this game parody was often liked for other reasons than its underlying criticism or behaviourist reward system.

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[8] http://cowclicker.com/?fbclid=IwAR3-n-Nkl8ZwN5hBcTq0k57sLpHduQ01TbDglPipidLQn5CyuXpGRcYnXVs
[9] We can suppose that most players read Bogost's explanatory essay before commenting on the game.

Atrawog, for example, enjoyed the game for the social interactions it facilitated and for its interruptability: "This app is absolutely lovely. It isn't as time consuming as other apps and you can still engage your friend into doing something silly together." Malcom Ryan appreciated the creation and collaboration possibilities it opened up. He and his friends used the game to engage in collaborative writing of poetic *cowmmentaries* on *Facebook*:

> Cow Clicker may have been intended as satire, but personally I quite enjoy it. For me it is kind of like a collaborative writing exercise. My friends and I routinely share our clicks and attach a cow-related semi-philosophical quote or other twist on a popular meme. [...] You could say that we have invented our own meta-game around Cow Clicker. (Malcom Ryan)

These testimonies suggest that the subversive potential of *Cow Clicker* was compromised by an element that Bogost later included in the game to favour interactions between players and that opened the door to players' appropriation of the game. This is what AnotherJason means when he writes: "Ian has somewhat failed in his mission, allowing players to invent their own meta-games which they actually enjoy, at no profit to himself"; a statement to which Bogost replied: "This is true." In his book *Play Anything*, published six years after the creation of the game, Bogost (2016) admitted that *Cow Clicker* became a "playground" despite how "urgent" it was to him "that the game performs the critique [he] set out for it." From his perspective, this could be explained by how "resilient is the human spirit" and by the capacity of people to transform "shit into gold." We can also consider the possibility that the game system was too open, while it should have been closer to *ludus* than *paidia*[10] to limit appropriative play and the invention of meta-games by the players. Allowing them to publish creative feed stories about cows on *Facebook* contradicted the criticism that Bogost was trying to make about the instrumental nature of relationships in casual games *à-la FarmVille*. As Jon suggests, it is the social aspects of these games that contribute to their appeal:

> According to my network model, you NEED this kind of obsessive time-based clicking in order for a game to go viral. If people don't keep feeding into each-others' addiction they all individually give up. What keeps them going is that if they stop for even a while they quickly see reports of their friends playing, which motivates them to start again, which in turn motivates any of their other friends who might otherwise unhook. (Jon)

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[10] In the typology of Roger Caillois (1958), "Paidia" is a type of game that allows free play and the pursuit of one's own goal, while "Ludus" is a type of game that is highly regulated.

Because the game parody was fun enough to be played, it failed to persuade everybody that casual games are worthless, as mentioned by Alexandra Holloway: "Playing *Cow Clicker* reminds me of how large and bovine I am becoming, sitting at the computer — yet the game compels me to keep at it! It sends the wrong message, Ian, the wrong message!" Jason Tanz (2011), from *Wired* magazine, for his part, stated that he enjoyed the game for its cute cows and for the satisfying sound they emitted when being clicked on:

> *Cow Clicker* was perversely enjoyable. The cartoon cow was cute, with a boxy nose and nonplussed expression. After every click, it emitted a satisfying moo. The game may have been dumb and even mean. But it was also, for some reason that resisted easy explanation, kind of appealing. (Tanz, 2011)

This testimony suggests that *Cow Clicker* would have been more effective as a criticism of casual games *à-la FarmVille* if it were stripped of the elements that make these games attractive.

This is precisely what Bogost attempted when he orchestrated the *Cowpocalypse* to put an end to his absurd experiment. On September 7, 2011, he permanently removed all cows from the game, while leaving the empty pastures on which players can still click to collect the one million Cow clicks needed to buy a silver cow bell. This minimalist version of the game seems more efficient in terms of criticism, since no artifice distracts players from its underlying message.
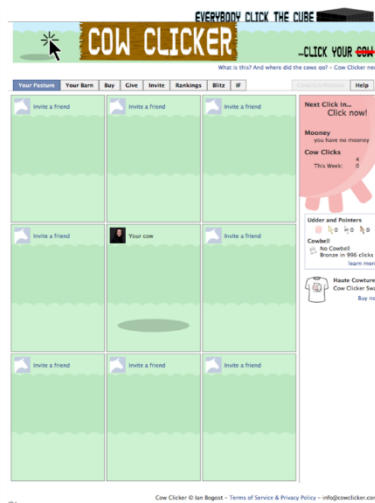

Image 3: Screen capture of *Cow Clicker* after the Cowpocalypse

As Jason Tanz (2011) mentions: "this is the truest version of *Cow Clicker*—the pure, cold game mechanic without any ornamentation." The comment a player who kept clicking on the empty pastures to reach one million clicks, illustrates how useful the *Cowpocalypse* was to clarify Bogost's criticism and encourage players to reflect upon the simplistic mechanics of casual games: "It is very interesting, clicking nothing, but then, we were clicking nothing the whole time. It just looked like we were clicking cows." (Scriven) To Bogost's despair, the *Cowpocalypse* did not convince all players that the game was a joke made at their expense. After the fateful day, Bogost kept receiving messages such as: "I've noticed that the Cowpocalypse has happened and users have to pay to see their cow. Do you have a goal or time frame of when this will be set back to normal?" to which he replied: "There's no way to pay to see your cow. The cows got raptured." To the player who complained that he would no longer play the game as it had become boring, Bogost mockingly replied that "It wasn't very fun before :)." (Alexander, 2011)

In retrospect, we can ask ourselves what Bogost could have done to maximize the chances of success of its parodic communication from the beginning. As advised by one player, he could have included clues or warnings in the game's description paragraph or sent direct messages to the players, in order to clarify his critical intention and avoid misinterpretation:

> I think it would be really interesting if you engaged your "clients" as a real individual instead of a shadowy developer or company. You could shut down the game and send a communique to the users explaining the project as seen by you, what were your goals and expectations, and how you feel about it now, etc. Maybe even say to them why you think they shouldn't be playing cowclicker. That would be a really good way of overcoming the alienation that systems as cowclicker grow off and communicating truth in a place made only of lies. (Bruno)

Despite *Cow Clicker* being unsuccessful at convincing everybody that they should not be playing casual games *à-la FarmVille,* as it cannot generate meaningful play, it nonetheless deserves credit for sparking off heated debates on this game genre. Indeed, many players defended this kind of game on Bogost's blog and explained what they like about it: "I like *FarmVille* because I get to build stuff instead of competing with everyone or killing people/things" (Kathlee). One person argues, in a four-page long comment, that the design principles parodied by *Cow Clicker* are the very ones that make these games socially relevant: "Every social game is educational, as it shows you that you have to work hard and study a lot to

be more successful than others." (JM) According to this player, *Cow Clicker* misses what many people consider to be the essence of these games, that is to say the possibility of developing a nice environment and watching it grow:

> FarmVille is FUN because you get to have a FARM. People — every day normal regular people — actually LIKE the idea of having a farm. It's part of our agrarian heritage. It's comforting. It's heartwarming. It's a nice little dream. [...] What you think of as an odious compulsion to return, players think of as a respite, a brief retreat from the rest of their day. (JM)

Cow Clicker perhaps generates such strong reactions because it mocks gameplay elements that require the involvement of the players to be actualized, and therefore laugh at their expense more than television and film parody mocks viewers. As mentioned by a player of *Cow Clicker*: "by playing it you become a part of the satire, but also a victim of it." (Jonathan Whiting) Another commentator states that the problem is not the people who play casual games, but the people who play these games non-casually: "It doesn't matter one whit that someone chooses to waste a bit of their day messing around on *FarmVille*. It only matters if someone takes it to excess." (Brian) According to a player named Ross Woodcock, this excess is triggered by a fifth aspect of social games that was overlooked by Bogost: the "Investment Trap", that is to say the fact that "the more you keep playing, to protect that investment [of time], the more time you would be "wasting" if you stopped."

Cow Clicker's failure to be identified as a parody by many players illustrates the need to combine procedural rhetoric with adequate textual and visual rhetoric in order to convey a message efficiently. Even though *Cow Clicker* did not discourage everybody from playing casual games *à-la FarmVille*, it gave people the occasion to reflect on their gaming practices, as well as on what makes these games appealing or problematic. Some of the aforementioned comments also demonstrate that certain players are very aware of the tactics used by game designers to keep them "hooked" on games.

An Analysis of *A.V.G.M.* and Its Reception

Bogost was not the first game designer to create a parody of casual games' simplistic mechanics for critical purpose. During the Global Game Jam in 2009, Edmund McMillen and Tyler Glaiel

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created *A.V.G.M.*[11]; a game in which players have to click on a switch to turn a light on and off, and to receive weird digital items (skeleton, computer desk, clocks, bone, dead bird, deer trophy, cross, etc.) that can be moved around in a small digital bedroom. As players progress in the game, more clicks are required to gain an extra item. Once players have clicked on the switch 10,212 times, the meaning of the anagram A.V.G.M. is revealed: Abusive Video Game Manipulation. During an interview featured in the film *Indie Game: Life After* (2016), McMillen and Glaiel explain that *A.V.G.M.* targets *Facebook* games that encourage players to perform repetitive and boring actions in exchange for worthless rewards, such as *FarmVille* (Zynga, 2009) and *PetSociety* (Playfish, 2009).

A.V.G.M.'s procedural rhetoric is based on a parodic exaggeration of the number of clicks necessary to obtain a virtual item and the quantity of items that it is possible to collect in a short period of time. Unlike casual games *à-la FarmVille*, there is no rational explanation as to why and when these items pop up. They quickly become cumbersome as they pile up in a the limited space of the digital bedroom. These transformations of the genre's rule-based conventions and environment highlight the absurdity of collecting useless virtual goods. At the semantic level, the image of a switch is a clever way to literalize the "clicking" game mechanic. As for the style, the hand-drawn objects recall the aesthetic of many indie games (Juul, 2014), as opposed to *Cow Clicker*'s stylistic imitation of cute and colourful graphics from casual games. Because indie game developers are often critical of mainstream games' aesthetics, values and business models, the adoption of this style can help players to infer the critical intention of *A.V.G.M.* The inclusion of extraneous elements that would be out of place in casual games *à-la FarmVille*, such as sexual artefacts (penis, sex doll, naked woman poster, etc.), as well as the publication of *A.V.G.M.* on indie game platforms such as *Kongregate*, *Newgrounds* and *Steam* instead of *Facebook*, help in distinguishing the parody from its target.
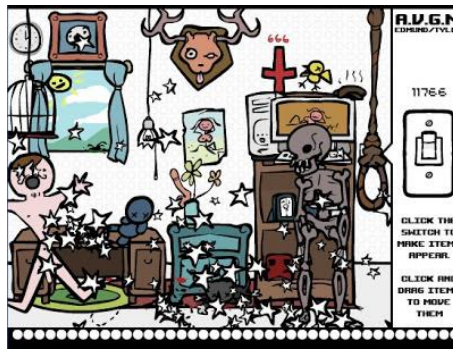
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[11] This game can be played on this website: https://www.kongregate.com/games/Edmund/avgm

Image 4: Screenshot of *A.V.G.M.*
(Source: http://edmundmcmillen.blogspot.com/2009/02/avgm-retrospective.html)

While *A.V.G.M.* involves less risk to be confused with casual games *à-la Farmville* than *Cow Clicker*, the strong dominance of parody techniques reliant on difference, over parody techniques based on repetition, could jeopardize the identification of the parodied game genre. As for the paratext, the game's instructions "A.V.G.M. is an experimental art game and winner of 2010's IGF award for innovation. Finishing the game unlocks the game's real title" does not provide any clue about its target, but might help players to anticipate a figurative meaning. The title *Abusive Video Game Manipulation*, for its part, clarifies the critical intention of the creators, but only the few players who clicked 10,212 times on the switch will see it.

It is apparent from my analysis of 188 comments about the game, posted on the website *Kongregate*, that a majority of players did not identify the game as a parody and remained puzzled by its gameplay: "OMG whats wrong with this? This must be called a "game"? Sorry, I don't understand the "concept", my mouse will explode before "win" something here...1/5" (Flypool). This might be explained by the fact that the large majority of players gave up before completing the game and then having the occasion to read its full title, because playing it is too boring and physically painful: "641 clicks and my screen is crowded with semi-related items. I have no desire to continue. I award this game 1/5 points, and may God have mercy on your soul" (Deterodae). Some tech-savvy players used autoclickers to finish the game quickly and effortlessly, while others developed tactics to progress faster: "use 2 hands to click [...] alternately tap like this: right index, left index, right index, left middle. and repeat." (loingelf) Reaching the end of the game does not, however, guarantee the identification of the game as a parody, since the revelation of the title can be interpreted as a "you wasted your time" notice (MuphinnMix). Furthermore, the sexual artefacts that appear after a considerable number of

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clicks distracted some players from the message. Indeed, many of them made remarks on the female sex doll –which eventually turns into a male sex doll– as if it were the reward of the game: "*randomly clicks around the game* Boring... *Flicks lights on and off and naked woman appears* Yeah I think I'm gonna stay" (White_Face). "EWWWWWWWWWWWWW........NAKED LADY WITH REALLY BIG BOOBS" (Ugmethesecond). "It needs about 10211 clicks to finish, weird game, and naked chick colour to naked man :(" (Dcshuzon).

Few players enjoyed the game for the digital items that it provides: "I have a noose, and a skeleton's bones, spider, voodoo doll, dead bird, computer, drapes, cross, picture frame, hand cleanser, tissues, WHAT THE F-?! I love the game!" (Landflow124). Others simply appreciated the game for the challenge of clicking 10,212 times: "the glory of finally finishing was well worth it. over 10,000 clicks Jesus Christ" (MuphinnMix). Those who read the intention of its creators on McMillen's blog seemed to have a better understanding of its criticism: "Read Edmund's blog! Before you play it!! Seriously!!!" (EPR89). Knowledge of the creators' previous games, however, helped players to accept *A.V.G.M.*'s "weirdness" more than to identify the parody: "If you've ever played any of Edmund's previous games, then you'd understand a lot of what goes on in his games. IOW, weirdness." (TheoSoft) Only a minority of players appreciated the irony of the game and interpreted it as a comment on people who like to click a button repeatedly: "umm wow!! i love how it makes you want to click it. ... although it does say more about the people that enjoy then [sic] it does about self..." (PosFeedBackCycle)

Overall, *A.V.G.M.* succeeds where *Cow Clicker* fails, and fails where *Cow Clicker* succeeds: it convinces players to stop playing the game, as it does not generate meaningful play, without provoking constructive debates around casual games *à-la FarmVille*. The effectiveness of its procedural rhetoric, based on parodic exaggeration, seems to be short-circuited by the lack of similarity between the parody and its target at the stylistic level, as well as by the publication of the parody on online platforms that are usually reserved for indie games. Most players are therefore unable to identify the target and to detect the underlying criticism.

An Analysis of *Progress Wars* and Its Reception

The parody of casual games *à-la FarmVille* entitled *Progress Wars*[12] seems to avoid the pitfalls that compromised the subversive potential of *Cow Clicker* and *A.V.G.M.* Created by Jakob Skjerning in 2010, this game parody encourages the player to click repetitively on the red button "Perform mission" to set a progress bar in motion. When progress is complete, a short statement summarizes the absurd quest that was performed, such as "Annoy Thugs" or "Hijack Eggplant". Just like in *Cow Clicker* and *A.V.G.M.*, the procedural rhetoric of the game is based on parody techniques: the acceleration of the time it takes to complete a quest and, as players level-up, the exaggeration of the number of clicks necessary to progress. This game, however, mobilizes many other parody techniques at the textual and stylistic levels which seems to support the message conveyed through the game procedures. Indeed, it reiterates many elements that characterize casual games' interface, such as the icon indicating the achieved level, the progression bar, the targeted advertisements, as well as the background colour palette and design.
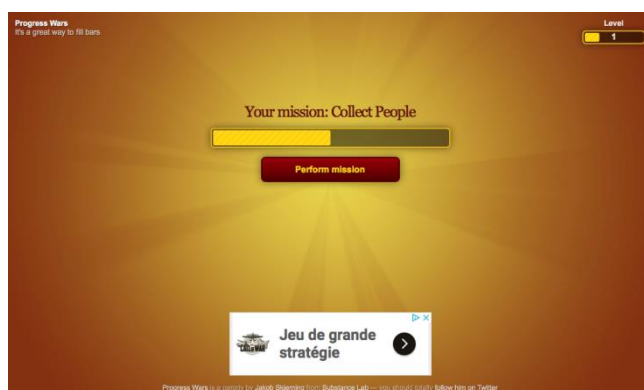

Image 3: Screenshot of *Progress Wars*

These semantic and stylistic elements contribute to the identification of the parody's target, while the magnification of the progression bar and its positioning in the middle of the screen help players to perceive the game as a parody. The fact that the game is stripped of all elements that make casual games attractive, such as cute characters, animals or anthropomorphic objects, minimizes the risk of confusing the parody with its target, and of enjoying playing the parody. The publication of *Progress Wars* on an independent website, rather than on *Facebook*, also contributes to differentiate it from the parodied genre. In comparison to *Cow Clicker* and

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[12] This parody can be played on the website: http://www.progresswars.com

A.V.G.M., *Progress Wars* exploits better the interplay between repetition and difference that characterizes the *modus operandi* of genre parodies. It also includes more clues in its paratexts: the title reminds one of the social game *Mafia Wars*, while literalizing the gameplay element of progression. The subtitles "Watching progress bars change has never been this much fun" or "It's a great way to fill bars", as well as the statement "Progress Wars is a parody" showing at the bottom of the screen, clearly state the parodic intent of the creator. Moreover, links towards the *Twitter* account and the website of the creator appear at the bottom of the screen for players who want to comment on the game or learn more about the intention behind it. When *Progress Wars* was released, in March 2010, it was possible to read the following explanation on Skjerning's website[13] .

> I have analyzed popular Facebook games and distilled their enticing gameplay into their core game mechanics. What's left is only the stuff that makes a game like Mafia Wars tick – none of the fluff. The result is Progress Wars.Progress Wars is the result of a lazy Sunday and a desire to point out the pointlessness of many casual games.

For all these reasons, *Progress Wars* seems to have a higher critical potential than *Cow Clicker* or *A.V.G.M.,* and a better chance of successfully communicating its criticism, as demonstrated by the reactions of players and journalists. 24-hours after its release, 27,000 people had visited the game's website.[14] According to its creator, this unexpected traffic was probably due to the fact that *Progress Wars* was reported in the weblogs *Metafilter*[15] and *Boing Boing*[16], as well as in the Internet Media *BuzzFeed*[17]. Journalist Neil Vidyarthi (2010), from *Adweek*, said:

> While social games like Mafia Wars tend to allow us to live out the fantasy of being a kingpin mobster, the truth is that a lot of the action consists of clicking through task bars. This game is a parody of that […] Jakob works for a company called Substance Labs, and likely created this to demonstrate that social games involve a lot of clicking.

Mike Fahey, from *Kotaku*, made a similar remark about the game:

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[13] https://mentalized.net/journal/2010/03/15/introducing-progress-wars/
[14] https://mentalized.net/journal/2010/03/22/progress-wars-followup/
[15] https://www.metafilter.com/90137/Watching-progress-bars-change-has-never-been-this-much-fun,
[16] https://boingboing.net/2010/03/16/progress-wars-grindi.html
[17] https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/scott/progress-wars

Progress Wars pokes fun at popular Facebook applications, distilling the gameplay down to its simplest level. If you feel ridiculous clicking just to watch a progress meter fill, then perhaps you should reconsider that farm you've been cultivating these past few months.

In the discussion thread of *Metafilter*, players often compared *Progress Wars* to its predecessor *Progress Quest* (Fredricksen, 2002); a game parody that runs its own course, as soon as the players are done creating their characters, to mock repetitive actions that we sometimes have to perform in MMORPGs like *EverQuest* (Sony, 1999) in order to get better equipment. Several references were also made to *FarmVille* and other *Facebook* games. Most players were therefore clearly aware of the game's parodic intent and target. The use, in several players' tweets[18], of exclamation points and of expresions such as "gem" (GeSignIT) and "twisted genius" (Dickon Laws) to qualify the game also indicates that they discerned the irony of the parody and joined in on the joke. For some players, the game also raised thoughts about simplistic game design: "When I think of #gamification I remind myself of @mentalizer's progresswars.com - need to have challenge + meaning, not just game mechanics." (Esteban Contreras)

Because it is difficult to interpret the meaning of 160-character tweets or posts, a reception study would be a worthwhile undertaking to confirm my assumption about the success of this parody criticism. Despite this apparent success, the absence of a dedicated comment section linked to this game did not favour deeper discussions and debates around casual games *à-la FarmVille* like Bogost's blog and Kongregate's forum did.

Discussion About the Subversive Potential of Casual Game Parodies

If we consider that these three parodies target oversimplistic, recurrent and manipulative game mechanics, mobilized by multibillionaire companies to maximize profit while minimizing risks, it becomes tempting to conceive them as a regenerative and subversive force within the casual game industry. By exaggerating the repetitive gameplay and behavioural reward systems of casual games *à-la FarmVille*, these parodies seem like creative ways to show how shallow and manipulative they are, as well as to encourage casual game designers to break the mould and

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[18] https://twitter.com/search?f=tweets&vertical=default&q=progresswars&src=typd

innovate. Because these parodies attack the conventions of a video game genre and the market ideology that encourages their repetition, without placing themselves on a pedestal, they seem to have a relevant political function. The *différance* between these parodies and their target allows them to deconstruct the model of casual games *à-la FarmVille* by showing that they are all, somehow, parodies because of the imitative nature of their mechanics. From that perspective, *Cow Clicker*, *A.V.G.M.* and *Progress Wars* appear as what Foucault (2004) calls "points of resistance" or what De Certeau (1980) calls "tactics": they provide tools for people who are not in a position of power to operate within and against the powerful genre system of the casual game industry.

These three parodies are, however, not equally subversive. While they all rely on a similar procedural rhetoric, based on parodic imitation and exaggeration of the "clicking" game mechanic, their subversive potential also depends on other parody techniques at the semantic and stylistic levels that each of them mobilizes differently, as well as on clues provided in their respective paratexts. We saw that the critical potential of *Cow Clicker* and *A.V.G.M.* is not always realized by their players. In the first case, players often interpret the parody as just another casual game *à-la FarmVille* while, in the second case, players do not always identify the target. We also saw that these two parodies fail to create a perfect balance between elements that pinpoint the targeted genre and elements that differentiate the parody from it. This could partly be explained by the fact that their textual and visual elements do not perfectly complement their procedural rhetoric in a way that would reinforce its subversive potential.

In light of these observations, it seems legitimate to nuance Bogost's theory on procedural rhetoric. Even though he admits that visual, verbal or written rhetoric are often at work in video games, Bogost (2007) considers procedural rhetoric as a more sophisticated and efficient technique to provoke significant long-term social change. While casual game parodies do not entirely throw into question the idea of persuading through gameplay, their mixed reception demonstrates that textual and visual elements can interfere with the message conveyed by procedures. When it comes to game parody, relying solely on procedural rhetoric to convey a message efficiently therefore seems like a risky undertaking. The mixed reception of *Cow Clicker* and *A.V.G.M.* should also encourage game scholars who value procedural complexity, and consider that game mechanics and algorithms are more significant to the players' experience than representation, fiction or narration, to nuance their position. It should incite

them to perceive visual, textual or written rhetoric not as alternative or supplemental to procedural rhetoric, but rather as complementary and correlative.

If we consider that these parodies not only target simplistic and manipulative game mechanics, but also mock (intentionally or not) the predominant feminine audience who plays casual games and who remains, to this day, marginalized in the gaming culture, it becomes harder to allocate a subversive force to them. As many feminist scholars highlighted (Anable; 2013; Vanderhoef, 2013, Consalvo, 2009), casual games like *FarmVille* are widely denigrated and considered to be culturally insignificant, not only because they are associated with procrastination, passivity or work, but also because they are associated with women. Indeed, the casual game audience has historically been the only segment of the gamer population that is mostly composed of women.[19] The casual/hardcore dichotomy has therefore been organized around gender binaries: casual games have been paired with femininity, and opposed to hardcore games and masculinity.While it is true that the overall gamer population has diversified over the past few years and gained a solid female player base, the masculine hardcore gamer identity remains the norm and is still celebrated, while the female casual gamer is perceived as a variation to the norm and denigrated (Kubik in Vanderhoef, 2013).

As John Vanderhoef (2013) shows in his article "Casual Threats: The feminization of Casual Video Games", discourses about casual games, produced by journalists, industry professionals and marketing teams, contributed to the "othering" and the "feminization" of casual games, by associating them with the mother figure or with emotions for instance. As a result, men who play casual games are not encouraged to talk about it. This also led to a cultural hierarchy between the hardcore and the casual in which the latter is positioned as inferior: "Feminized casual games become insignificant, frivolous, and a waste of time and money as opposed to masculinized hardcore games, which are viewed as important, serious, and worthy of investment." (Vanderhoef, 2013) As Vanderhoef (2013) explains, "the casual space is defined negatively by a lack of hardcore gaming qualities" such as photorealistic graphics, complex storylines and challenging interactions, while casual gamers are defined by their lack of gaming

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[19] According to a surve conducted in 2006, 71 percent of the casual games audience is female and most of these players are over the age of 35. Another survey, made by Jesper Juul in 2010, shows that up to 93 percent of casual gamers might be female (Vanderhoef, 2013).

literacy, as well as their lack of desire for violence and sexuality. In addition to being considered as culturally irrelevant, casual games are sometimes perceived as a threat by players who fear that they will replace the typical hardcore games they enjoy, and that casual gamers will destroy the traditional gamer identity[20] (Vanderhoef, 2013).

According to Anable (2013) and Consalvo (2009, p. 50), it is therefore not a coincidence if the game industry, the popular press and the academia rarely ascribe cultural meaning to casual games and fail to acknowledge that casual gamers can also be devoted fans who produce game culture in their own way. Yet, Consalvo (2009) demonstrates, in her article "Hardcore Casual: Game Culture *Return(s) to Ravenhearst*", that casual gamers also share hints about games, complain about glitches, discuss storylines on forums, create paratexts such as reviews, fan fictions and walkthroughs, and acquire gaming capital when they do so. People who are considered as "casual gamers" are therefore not as casual and different from mainstream gamers as we might have expected: they are deeply invested in different activities surrounding the games and form closely- knit communities of players who help each other.

Assumptions about casual games prevented journalists and scholars from perceiving their cultural relevance. Casual games such as *Diner Dash*, for example, were seen as a kitsch and overly sentimental celebration of the Protestant work ethic[21] (Bogost, 2011) or as a insignificant distraction from more serious pursuits such as work (Anderson, 2012 cited by Anable, 2013). Yet, Anable (2013) demonstrates that they can also be interpreted as a "tactical response to our conditions of labor." When played at work, they can be considered as a way for players to gain more personal leisure time in a service-based economy where the time and space of labour have increasingly infiltrated the private time and space of leisure. When casual games are only interpreted in terms of immaterial labour, it becomes hard to see that they mobilize affects about our relationship to work, and that their conflation of work and play is what makes them appealing to women who constantly have to juggle shifts at work and at home (Chess in Anable, 2013). When their simplistic mechanics are quickly dismissed, it becomes difficult to see that

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[20] As Shaw specifies, the gamer identity has always been fragile because geeks were for a long time infantilized, emasculated and stigmatized from the mainstream culture (cited in Vanderhoef, 2013).

[21] Sentimentality has historically been associated to femininity and depreciated.

the repetitive clicks –allowing players to perform complex actions such as harvesting a field– actually transform our relationship to the digital device on which we work daily.[22]

From a social constructivist perspective, what is considered as a "game" is a social construct, not a natural fact. In the same vein, "one is not born a gamer, but becomes one"[23] (Shaw, 2013). Because casual games do not require a gaming system, gaming skill or procedural complexity, and because they are repetitive and easy, they challenge our perception of what is considered as a game and what is considered a gamer. Without saying that they are radical or progressive media forms, Anable (2013) reminds us that they "animate a different structure of feeling" than other types of video games, and that setting aside our biases towards them allows to perceive their cultural significance and pertinence.

While the parodies analyzed in the present article are not sexist per se and do not highlight the feminine attributes of casual games or associate them with women, they remain blind to these considerations. As Deterding (2016) mentions, their "*reductio ad absurdum* of progress mechanics" sends the underlying message that these mechanics do not involve "real" skills and cannot be made for "real" gamers. We can therefore ask ourselves if these parodies risk to reinforce binaries between hardcore "real" gamers and casual "fake" gamers. We can even fear that they consolidate stereotypes about women casual players and involuntarily contribute to the perpetuation of gender inequalities in the gaming culture. From that perspective, their subversive potential seems to be compromised.

If these parodies did ever have a subversive potential at the time of their creation, that seems to be less certain in 2019. A few years after the release of *Cow Clicker*, Julien "Orteil" Thiennot released the game parody *Cookie Clicker* (2013) in which players can click on cookies to bake them, and eventually buy resources (grandmas, farms, factories, etc.) that automatically bake the cookies much faster. At that point, the players can just "sit back, rest their fingers, and watch batch after batch of fresh cookies roll in." (Sankin; 2014) *Cookie Clicker* gained over 50,000 players in the first few hours and was described as "the most addictive new game on the

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[22] According to Anable (2013), the frenetic clicking of the player lays bare the time we spend and the hard work we accomplish on our digital devices "when we move from one window to another, negotiating the different languages, rules, and logics of the different software programs that we are using." It unmasks the fact that our everyday work with digital tools is not only an experience of ease, efficiency, and flow, but also an experience of exhausting "pauses, breakdowns, interruptions, eruptions, and glitches."

[23] This sentence is a twist on Simone De Beauvoir's famous quote: "one is not born a woman, but becomes one."

Internet." (Sankin, 2014). According to the Marxist interpretation of Sankin (2014), this game illustrates "someone's class transition from labor to capital."

Image 5: Screenshot of *Cookie Clicker*
(Source: http://cookieclicker.wikia.com/wiki/File:HELP.png)

For Bogost (2016), *Cookie Clicker* is the "logical conclusion of *Cow Clicker*": by allowing the player to bake cookies without even playing the game, it brings his concept to the next level.

However, the release of *Cookie Clicker* spawned many clones that simply copied its program code and replaced the cookies with other items such as sushi. As Deterding (2016) mentions, these "fully serious, highly polished, freemium-monetized games", like "Clicker Heroes" (Playsaurus, 2014), "Make it Rain: Love of Money" (Space Inch, 2014), or "AdVenture Capitalist" (Hyper Hippo, 2015), "capitalized" on the success of game parodies and contributed to their normalization. In this context, parody seems to be used as a pretext to repeat trivial game mechanics in order to achieve instant success and make a profit. What Dan Harries says about Hollywood film parody can therefore apply to casual game parody: "Its discursive standardization has, in fact, contributed to its own canonization and secured a relatively easy co-option by a market economy oh-so-eager to capitalize on 'radical' iconicity." (2000, p. 130) No matter how well designed they are, parodies of casual games *à-la Farmville* seem to have lost their subversive appeal along the way. As they have multiplied, they have in fact evolved into a video game genre currently called "incremental games", "idle games" or "clicker games".[24] Described as games that provide a low-pressure experience, constant positive feedback, and growth with minimal interaction (Pecorella, 2015), or as games characterized by a currency (or number) that increases at an accelerated rate with little or no effort on the player's part (King,

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[24] The proliferation of clones modelled after a successful game often marks the beginning of a genre crystallization process, at the end of which a generic label is created (Arsenault, 2009). For example, many clones of *Doom* (id Software, 1993) flooded the game industry before the label "first-person shooter" started to be employed by players and journalists.

2015), these games are currently enjoyed by millions of players for their own sake, as shown by the articles "Numbers Getting Bigger: What Are Incremental Games, and Why Are They Fun" (Alexander, 2015) and "Clicker Games Are Suddenly Everywhere On Steam" (Grayson, 2015). As Deterding explains (2016): "What started as an artistic inversion of game design conventions to demarcate the boundary of "real" games resulted in a sub-genre expanding rather than delimiting the category." Casual game parodies therefore had the opposite effect of what their creators might have expected.

The fact that they developed into a genre confirms what many scholars have said about the evolution of parodies from subversive tools to canons:

> [P]arody may have moved from being a potential paradigm of modern aesthetic form to being a cliché. Parody seems, to many, to have ceased being a way to new forms, as the Russian formalists believed, and to have become – ironically – a model of the prevailing norm. (Hutcheon, 1985: 28)

This also illustrates Foucault's theory according to which "points of resistance" are often normalized and reintegrated into the system instead of strategically "swarming" to provoke a revolution (2004, p. 621). Today, it has become almost impossible to distinguish critical casual game parodies from idle games that were created to be enjoyed for their own sake and to make profit. Even *Cow Clicker* is now referred to as an incremental game on *Wikipedia,* while many casual games are called "parodies" because of their clone-driven mode of production (Zimmerman in Juul, 2010, p. 101). In this environment saturated with imitation, irony, and endless self-referential loops, can we still expect people to play casual game parodies ironically?

Conclusion

In this article, I analyzed three parodies (*Cow Clicker*, *A.V.G.M.* and *Progress War*) which mock the simplistic challenges and behavioural reward system of casual games like *FarmVille* with the help of a procedural rhetoric based on the imitation and transformation of the clicking game mechanic. I examined their visual elements, gameplay, and paratexts to evaluate their critical potential and concluded that *Cow Clicker* and *A.V.G.M.* do not achieve a perfect balance between parody techniques that are based on repetition and those that are based on difference, which increases the risk of misinterpretation and compromises the clarity of their criticism. The

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analysis of comments posted by their players on forums, blogs and articles, for its part, revealed that many players do not detect the irony of these parodies or do not identify their target. *Progress Wars*, for its part, exploits more efficiently the parodic interplay between repetition and difference, and this seems to have facilitated the comprehension of its criticism among the players. These analyses led me to nuance Bogost's theory on procedural rhetoric and to argue that it should be complemented by adequate visual and textual rhetoric to be effective. Because the tendency to denigrate casual games and the people who play them is partly symptomatic of the gaming culture's blatant sexism, I also questioned the subversive force of casual game parodies which indirectly mock a segment of the player population that has been marginalized: women. I finally developed the idea that casual game parodies lost their subversive appeal since they proliferated and evolved into a video game genre.

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Résumé : Cet article analyse trois parodies vidéoludiques (*Cow Clicker*, *A.V.G.M.* et *Progress War*) se moquant des défis simplistes et du système de récompense behavioral des jeux occasionnels à la *FarmVille*. À la lumière de théories sur la parodie, leurs éléments visuels, leurs mécaniques de jeu et leurs paratextes sont examinés de sorte à évaluer leur potentiel critique. La centaine de commentaires formulés par leurs joueurs sur des blogues et forums démontrent pour leur part qu'un bon nombre d'entre eux ne décèlent pas l'ironie de ces parodies ou ne parviennent pas à identifier leur cible. Dans la section discussion, la théorie de Bogost sur l'efficacité de la rhétorique procédurale est alors nuancée à partir de l'idée qu'une rhétorique visuelle ou textuelle doit l'appuyer pour qu'elle fonctionne. L'article remet par ailleurs en question la force subversive des parodies à l'étude en soulignant le fait qu'elles ne dénigrent pas seulement les mécaniques simplistes et manipulatrices des jeux occasionnels, mais aussi les joueuses à qui ces jeux s'adressent principalement et qui sont encore, à ce jour, marginalisées dans la culture vidéoludique. L'article développe enfin l'idée que les parodies de jeux occasionnels à la *FarmVille* ont perdu leur potentiel subversif depuis qu'elles ont proliféré et évolué vers un genre vidéoludique dénué de toute intention critique appelée « clicker games », « idle games » ou « incremental games ».

Mots-clés: jeu vidéo, genre, parodie, jeu occasionnel, joueur occasionnel, FarmVille, jeu incrémental, joueuse