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Crossy Road and *Over the Hedge*: The New Voices for Environmentalism

When you hear the term “environmental media” do you usually characterize these representations as serious and boring, or exciting and humorous? The answer is most likely the former. While a number of environmental media continue to present their ideas in traditionally formal manners, a new representation has been changing the way in which people receive these environmental messages and that is comedy. As opposed to the serious presentation of environmentalism, comedy acts as a new and effective way to convey environmental messages to a contemporary audience. Two examples that exemplify this successful approach is *Crossy Road* and *Over the Hedge* (2006). The two mediums are able to appeal to a broad audience by using comedy and realistic representation to convey their environmental messages.

Crossy Road was made by Hipster Whale and is a game that can be purchased through the App Store or on Google Play on any smartphone. With over 150,000,000 downloads to date, the app is a more modernized version of the arcade game *Frogger*, based off of the overused joke, “Why did the chicken cross the road?”¹ By basing the app off of such a pervasive joke, the developers can reach a wider audience because of the general awareness of the phrase. This background not only provides the game with a comedic element that makes the environmental message more palpable, but this tactic also creates a sense of familiarity for millions of users because of the joke’s widespread use.

In the game, players begin as a chicken and must tap and swipe to cross streets, rivers and

¹ Serenity Caldwell, “Crossy Road Review: I Should Hate it, But I Love It”, *IMore*, 2014.

railroads without being hit by cars, trucks or trains. As a player acquires more coins throughout the course of the game, users can redeem the coins for different characters.² The game's setting and sound closely resemble that of any generic urban city street accompanied by other natural elements. However, when a player loses, specifically when their character runs into or gets hit by a motor vehicle, a splat sound and chicken squeal matches the action.

Although the app is mainly intended for entertainment, the way in which the game emulates real-life situations and presents a “meaningfully local” scenario leads to a closer examination on the players’ part. In her piece, “Games as Environmental Text”, Professor Alenda Chang explains how “[m]ore environmentally realistic games could affect our understanding of real-world environmental issues, either by implicitly or explicitly modeling different forms of our individual and collective environmental agency”³. A vast majority of the players can be guilty of contributing to the negative effects of development, like the road kill depicted in the game by way of using motor vehicles. This is not the only example of environmental agency that *Crossy Road* displays to connect the game world to the real world. It also resonates with an extensive number of players who use cars, buses, trains or taxis on an everyday basis. Another way in which the developers make an environmental message more prominent is through their use of setting and sound. As mentioned earlier, the app includes visuals of different urban and natural elements like cars, buildings, trees and grass, but these pieces do more than add to the game’s cute aesthetics. By combining urban objects and sounds that one would likely see in their commute to work with rivers, logs and trees, the developers create a more “meaningfully local” situation that would likely evoke deeper thought about how

² *Crossy Road*, Apple App Store, 2017.

³ Alenda Chang, “Games as Environmental Texts.” *Qui Parle*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2011, p. 60.

the game relates to an individual's life.

While the setting and sound are only one part of the app, the characters constitute another large part of the game's ability to reach a broader audience and relay environmental messages. As of now there are 26 different categories of characters a player can unlock, many of which include more classic animals like a chicken, cow or horse; some include geographically specific characters like kangaroos or kiwis, while others contain timelier and pop-cultural characters like the doge or a mummy. These three types of characters work together to create a balance of realism and comedy for the everyday player. The classic and geographically-specific animals consist of creatures that exist in the real world, so by including these characters, the developers draw more attention to real-world problems surrounding animals. However, it is the geographically-specific animals that contribute the most to appealing to a broader audience. The app includes a variety of animals from Brazil, Korea, the U.K. and England, China, Australia and New Zealand. With a more inclusive variety, the app not only appeals to an American audience, but to an international audience as well. Still, the attempt to attract wider audiences increases as the setting and sounds change alongside the geographical character. For example, if a user plays as "Brazil Chicken", they will see more colorful buildings, palm trees, trash and power lines and hear occasional party music. These changes in setting and sound are supposed to indicate Brazilian-specific traits, consequently creating an environment that Brazilians might find more humorous or familiar. Focusing back onto how these types of characters represent environmental issues, it is also crucial to point out that by introducing timely and pop cultural characters alongside the more realistic animals, the developers add a more comedic effect to the game itself while also portraying environmentalist notions. For example, the cow represents a real-life situation that could trigger some thoughts about roadkill, while the mummy is solely used for

entertainment purposes. Overall, the game's wide variety of character options allows for not only a wider reception, but an appropriate balance of novelty and reality.

The other form of media I will be analyzing, *Over the Hedge*, is a PG-rated animated comedy produced by DreamWorks Studios in 2006. Although not as overtly environmental as companies like BBC or National Geographic, recently DreamWorks has been making more environmentally conscious decisions in their production. Before creating *Over the Hedge*, DreamWorks signed onto the Green Production Guide, whose goal is to reduce the film industry's carbon footprint⁴. With the film industry as one of the many culprits of increasing carbon output, their commitment to creating a healthier atmosphere indicates the company's growing environmental impact⁵. Additionally, DreamWorks received the Conservation International Award for their film *Kung Fu Panda* in 2008. In their acceptance speech, CEO Jeffrey Katzenberg stated that “[a]t DreamWorks Animation, we’ve become environmentally aware because we spend so much of our time trying to emulate nature”⁶, further confirming DreamWork’s progression of becoming an environmentally friendly company and aiding in the environmental read of their film *Over the Hedge*.

The film begins with a clan of forest creatures, led by Verne the turtle, who wakes up from hibernation to find their precious feeding land taken over by a suburban neighborhood. To their surprise, a sneaky raccoon, R.J., shows the group how to take advantage of the humans’ belongings. However, the raccoon only plans to use the group to collect enough food to repay a

⁴ “PGA Green,” *PGA Green | Green Production Guide*.

⁵ In a case study, these three scholars researched the impact of film distribution online and found that this small part of filmmaking still contributes to a large amount of carbon output. (Elisabeth Hochshorner, et al, “Carbon Footprint of Movie Distribution Via the Internet: a Swedish Case Study.” *Journal of Cleaner Production*, vol. 87, 2015, pp. 199).

⁶ Kim McCabe, “Dreaming of a Healthy Planet with DreamWorks Animation–Human...” *Human Nature – Conservation International Blog*, 2011.

hungry bear that he stole from. Fortunately, R.J. has a change of heart and helps the forest animals outsmart the humans and his bear enemy. Although the animals encounter many dangerous situations with the humans, they eventually collect enough food to last them the rest of the year.

By using a close scene analysis to evaluate humor and realistic representations, I hope to show how these aspects lead to environmental thought. In one particular scene, Verne takes his first steps into the mysterious neighborhood and encounters countless near-death experiences. In this sequence, the chaotic chain reaction first ensues when a sprinkler surprises Verne and causes him to run into a marble ball décor, triggering a set of barbeque tools to almost puncture him. After a hose flings Verne in the air and into a toy car where he manages to maneuver through the busy streets where he encounters a reckless driver, a speeding bicyclist and a group of teens playing hockey. Fortunately, he does not get seriously injured in any of these events and makes his way back to the forest. While this sequence is full of a roller coaster of emotions, Sigmund Freud reasoned that we laugh at situations like the one described because of the tension relief⁷. However, combined with the realistic representations and sounds of cars, bikes and other dangerous elements, this comedic effect also makes one wonder what would happen if that scenario were to occur in real life⁸. Unfortunately, the turtle would most likely not survive in the end.

In her essay, “Satire, Propaganda, Play, Storytelling. Notes on Critical Interactive Digital Narratives”, Gabriele Ferri analyzes three environmental video games using the Satirical

⁷ John Lippit, “Philosophical Perspectives on Humour and Laughter.” *Durham University*, Durham University Press, 1991, pp. 33.

⁸ The idea and effects of her term “meaningfully local”, which are explained later in the paper, can explain why realistic representation is an effective tool in environmental media. (Alenda Chang, “Games as Environmental Texts.” *Qui Parle*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2011, p. 60.)

Discourse Analysis. This approach includes six features that help explain how satire can be used to add social commentary⁹. Here are the six features: the medium must have a second-order text, meaning the story interrupts the opponent's views. Secondly, the material must target easy distinguishable antagonists. It creates complicated emotional engagement, often portrayed as “‘bitter’ laughter”. It establishes an ideological axiology that enables the audience to clearly distinguish the good characters from the bad. The medium must also consistently pursue a cause. Lastly, it must include some parodical elements. Ferri uses these criteria to analyze Molleindustria's video games about various environmental and social issues and uses each feature to strengthen her argument that satire can be an ideal platform for social commentary. Similarly, I hope to use the Satirical Discourse Analysis to explain how comedy and satire help frame *Crossy Road* and *Over the Hedge*'s environmental messages in a more palpable manner.

Many of the aspects of Satirical Discourse Analysis base its criteria on identifying the good and the bad and how these two sides create a story for the viewer or user. So, by analyzing these aspects along with the comedic criteria of Satirical Discourse Analysis, I hope to show how these satirical aspects contribute to a unique way to convey environmental messages. In the film *Over the Hedge*, it is clearly defined that the antagonists are humans, as they are classified as reckless and evil throughout the story. The film meets this second feature of Satirical Discourse Analysis as filmmakers portray humans as reckless and oblivious in the scene where Verne takes his first steps into the suburban neighborhood. In this sequence, as described earlier, Verne successfully dodges a large SUV, a speeding bike and a group of hockey players. However, the careless demeanor in which the filmmakers portray the woman driving the car, saying phrases

⁹ Gabriele Ferri, “Satire, Propaganda, Play, Storytelling. Notes on Critical Interactive Digital Narratives.” *Interactive Storytelling Lecture Notes in Computer Science*, 2013, pp. 175.

like, “No, I can talk. I’m just driving” as she almost demolishes Verne, provides the viewers with a clear characterization of how they want to show humans. The filmmakers also make a few of the humans appear evil, specifically the characters of Dwayne La Fondant and Gladys. La Fondant, also known as the verminator, is first introduced accompanied by daunting music upon his arrival and is presented in a way where the camera looks up to him, emphasizing his intimidating large stature. Not only does the exterminator’s framing speak to his immense threat, but his nickname refers to the iconic terminator, a cyborg assassin. With all of these first impressions being introduced in the first twenty seconds of his introduction, viewers can clearly determine who the antagonist is for the animals. The film also includes the third feature of the analysis by simultaneously evoking humor and sadness. While many sequences include jokes, like the one previously analyzed, references to not having enough food for the rest of the year also create a sense of sadness and worry. The fourth feature is shown by the film’s depiction of humans as reckless and evil and the animals as only trying to survive. By placing the animals as the protagonists, viewers would more likely see them in a positive light. As mentioned earlier, the film consistently presents an environmental cause every time one of the animals almost dies as a result of humans and their various commodities. The film is also full of parodical elements that meet the sixth criteria of Satirical Discourse Analysis. For example, the verminator acts as an exaggerated version of an everyday exterminator.

Similar to *Over the Hedge*, I hope to use the Satirical Discourse Analysis to demonstrate how these comedic features contribute to a unique way to communicate environmental messages. The first part of the analysis is identical to my analysis on *Over the Hedge* as the opponent’s views are hijacked by showing the negative effects of human development. Humans and their man-made artifacts like cars and trains are obviously presented as the antagonist because the

developers created the game to also depict them as reckless. Since one of the main premises of the game is to avoid the speeding cars and trains, players are forced to maneuver their way through the countless vehicles that have no intention of stopping. Not only do the cars' hasty fixation on getting from point A to point B show how humans could care less about animals that wander into highly populated streets, but this attitude also reflects how carelessly humans develop natural land to make room for their highways and cities without considering the environmental consequences. The game also creates complicated emotional reactions in the humorous characters and sounds and the frustratingly unbeatable nature of the game. Having the users play as the selected animal or novelty character orients the players to see their avatar as the positive actor and the obstacles, like the cars, as the negative actors. Similar to *Over the Hedge*, the game touches on environmental issues every time an animal dies from a speeding car or train. This game also matches the sixth feature of Satirical Discourse Analysis by presenting the game as a parody of real-life animal crossings in cities.

Both *Crossy Road* and *Over the Hedge* share similar features in the Satirical Discourse Analysis. One of these similarities is the distinct way the two show humans and their commodities as a detriment to animals throughout the game and film. The main way these mediums convey this clear message is via comedy and satire. Whether viewers laugh at the funny sounds the chicken makes when it jumps or Verne's series of near-death encounters, both the film and app show how dangerous humans and their development are through comedic strategies.

In addition to the brief discussion about the appearance of comedy, realistic interface and representation in specific analyses of each medium, it is necessary to go more in depth to show how these elements, alongside a kid-friendly and adult-friendly representation, make the film and

app more accessible. Using comedy as a way to convey environmental issues is a more light-hearted and fresh approach to environmentalism. Multiple studies have been done on how effective humor is on receiving information. One particular study compares humorous advertisements to non-humorous advertisements and the effectiveness of each on a sample group¹⁰. The researchers found that the humorous advertisement “humanizes” the message being conveyed, allows recipients to be less resistant of the messages and accounts for a higher recall of information. But, can these claims that came from a simulated situation be applied to real-world occurrences? Yes, in 1987 a group called the Raging Grannies, ranging from 52 to 67 years old, offered a new technique to protesting. They used witty songs and other forms of comedy as a means of promoting awareness of and debate over social and political issues. A paper on the Raging Grannies notes, “Because of their unpredictability and colourfulness the Grannies attracted media attention, at times generating debates in the press, which sometimes had their own tinges of humour”¹¹. With comedy as a successful tool for relaying information and opinions, *Over the Hedge* and *Crossy Road*’s use of comedy creates an effective approach to spreading environmental messages to far-reaching audiences.

The presentation of content is also an important way to reach an extensive audience. Scholar and video game designer, Ian Bogost observed that familiar icons lead to “visual authenticity” and add to the film and game’s social values¹². In other words, by adding contemporary elements to a film or app, the social meanings of the medium are further

¹⁰ John H. Murphy, et al, “The Impact of Program Environment on Recall of Humorous Television Commercials.” *Journal of Advertising*, vol. 8, no. 2, 1979, pp. 19.

¹¹ Carole Roy, “The Original Raging Grannies: Using Creative and Humorous Protests for Political Education.” *Encyclopedia of Activism and Social Justice*, vol. 33, no. 4.

¹² Ian Bogost, *How To Do Things with Videogames*. University of Minnesota Press, 2011, pp. 54-55.

emphasized. For example, the pop cultural characters in *Crossy Road* and branding of food that closely resemble Pringles, Doritos, Red Bull and other familiar junk food companies in *Over the Hedge* account for these “visual authenticities”. Similar to Bogost, Professor Chang argues that ecological accuracy and specificity make games more “meaningfully local”, allowing the medium to use the idea of environmental realism more seriously¹³. And if the game takes on a more realistic representation of life, users and viewers will be more inclined to think of the game as real, hopefully causing them to remember the environmental concerns that were emphasized in the game. By using everyday objects and ideas in their content, *Over the Hedge* and *Crossy Road* are able to appeal to a broader market.

Overall, *Crossy Road* and *Over the Hedge* use comedy and realistic representations to spread their environmental messages to a broad audience. Through analyzing their backgrounds and closely examining specific details in the two, users and viewers can see how *Crossy Road* and *Over the Hedge* incorporate environmental messages. Similarly, by using Satirical Discourse Analysis to relate comedy to these messages, developers and filmmakers show how their use of humor evoke deeper environmental thought. By using film and games, alongside realistic representations and comedy, the creators tap into an unexpected way to convey environmental messages to a broader audience.

¹³ Alenda Chang, “Games as Environmental Texts.” *Qui Parle*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2011, p. 60.

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