The Algorithm is the Message: Computing as a Humor-Generating Mode

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Abstract

This position paper starts from the examination of the "Universal Handbook for Political Speeches," a satirical manual created during communist Poland as a modular tool to parody propaganda's rigid linguistic patterns and its absence of meaning, humorously revealing the absurdity of totalitarian "newspeak." Presented here in English for the first time, the "Handbook" is explored as an analog precursor to computational humor systems. More importantly, this artifact shows that humor, rather than being the product of computing, can also arise from a computationalized, combinatorial structure and process. This shifts the focus on computational algorithms and processes as a *mode* of humor generation, rather than a *tool*. That is, computing *itself*—with its processes, structure, iteration, and combinatorial logic—can be a source of humor, rather than an instrument to fabricate it. The very workings of the machine are what can make us laugh, regardless of what the machine carries or produces. The "Handbook" functions here as a spark for reflection, and hopefully a broader discussion, on how this alternative view may impact the evolution of computational humor and its applications at the dawn of the era of artificial general intelligence.

1 Introduction

The "Universal Handbook for Political Speeches" is a satirical guide distributed in Poland at the time of the Solidarity movement in the 1980s which mocked the empty, verbose, and ideologically charged rhetoric of communist propaganda (Marone, 2010). The "Handbook" seems to be a playful embodiment of "newspeak," a fictional language introduced in George Orwell's dystopian novel *1984* designed as a tool of political control to limit freedom of thought and enforce ideological conformity. The idea of recommending this mechanical approach to its users, both mimicked and lampooned the propaganda's repetitive and formulaic nature, hence unmasking its absurdity. The "Handbook" operated as a modular template that allowed users to construct endless variations of lengthy, meaningless speeches by combining prewritten phrases from four distinct categories (columns), each containing a list of interchangeable phrases (see Appendix A). These columns corresponded to different components of a sentence:

- **Column I**: Opening phrases or thematic introductions (e.g., "Dear colleagues," "On the other hand," "But let us not forget that").
- **Column II**: Descriptive or action-oriented statements related to the topic (e.g., "the execution of outlined programmatic tasks," "the scope and location of worker training," "the current organizational structure").
- **Column III**: Transitional or explanatory phrases (e.g., "compels us to analyze," "plays a crucial role in defining," "highlights the importance of appreciating").
- **Column IV**: Concluding or outcome-oriented statements (e.g., "the current administrative and financial conditions," "further directions of development," "a universal participatory system").

Proceedings of the 1st Workshop on Computational Humor (CHum), pages 96–100

To create a speech, the user would select one phrase from each column sequentially (I → II → III → IV) and repeat this process as needed, recycling or varying combinations to extend the speech indefinitely. For example:

- **Combination 1**: "Dear colleagues, the ongoing informational and propagandistic protection of our activities plays a significant role in establishing a training system tailored to workers' needs."
- **Combination 2**: "On the other hand, the effort to strengthen and develop effective structures facilitates the preparation and construction of advanced forms of action."

This approach enables users to produce a seemingly endless series of sentences, all of which sound appropriately formal, authoritative, and ideologically consistent, while having no actual meaning. This parodied the vacuity of communist propaganda, which relied on impressive-sounding language to obscure its lack of substantive ideas.

The humor of the handbook lies in its overt mechanical sequencing, which creates the illusion of coherence regardless of content. By exposing the mechanical nature of speech construction, it highlighted how the political rhetoric of the regime was less about conveying meaning and more about projecting authority and reinforcing ideological control. Some of the key features that made the "Handbook" effective include:

- **Endless Combinations.** The modular design allowed for thousands of combinations, making the system seem both vast and methodical.
- **Parodic Authenticity.** The phrases were written in a style that closely mimicked real propaganda speeches, giving the satire its biting edge.
- **Reflection of Reality.** The mechanical relentlessness of the "Handbook" mirrored the mechanical absurdity of actual propaganda, creating a form of meta-critique.

Besides its function at the time of communism in Poland, the "Handbook" invites us to reflect on computational approaches to language and humor considering computers and algorithms not just as *tools*, but as a *mode* of generating humor. We may say that the text of the handbook was plain and not interesting in itself, but what made it fun and intriguing was its computationalization. The "satirical mechanization" of the "Handbook" demonstrates how humor can emerge from the mechanical application of language rules. This analog system anticipated computational humor systems (Amin & Burghardt, 2020) by using predefined templates and algorithms to create meaning—or its illusion. By mechanically generating discourse, it exposed propaganda's reliance on pre-fabricated rhetoric, revealing the manipulation and vacuity underlying authoritarian speech. This form of disruptive combinatorial creativity shows that humor can emerge not only from the content of the phrases, but in the very act of their arbitrary sequencing. This analog, yet computationalized form of humor exemplifies how structure, randomness, and sequencing can work to generate humor.

2 Potential Implications of Computing as a Humor-Generating Mode

2.1 Humor as Process, Not Output

Traditionally, computation in humor has been viewed as a tool—a means to achieve a predefined outcome, such as generating jokes, detecting irony, or analyzing linguistic patterns. This functional perspective treats computational processes as subservient to the end product: the humorous content itself. However, reframing computation as a humorous mode shifts the emphasis to the generative computational process instead of the outcome. From this perspective, humor emerges not from the final product (a joke or punchline) but from the structure, sequencing, and combinatorial logic inherent in computational processes. For example, in the "Universal Handbook for Political Speeches," the humor lies in its *mechanical absurdity*, as interchangeable fragments produce endless combinations of pompous, empty rhetoric. This shows that computing *itself* can embody humor when its processes are exposed.

Reframing computing as a humorous mode invites researchers to explore how structure and process—the underlying mechanics of humor generation—can themselves serve as sources of comedy. This perspective shifts attention from the *output* to the *systems and logic* driving humor, fundamentally rethinking the origins of humor in computational systems. As a result, the

understanding of computational humor may evolve into a domain where the *humorous mechanics* of systems—not just their *humorous outputs*—become complementary to understanding and designing computational humor.

2.2 Meta-Humor and Human-Machine Dynamics

Meta-humor arises when a system reflects on or reveals its own mechanisms. Computational humor as a mode inherently generates meta-humor, where the system's own generative logic ignites the joke. This parallels the "Handbook," where humor arises primarily from its visible combinatorial structure rather than the semantic content of individual phrases. Similarly, the unintentionally humorous results of AI systems (Shane, 2019) often arise from their rigid adherence to structures, patterns, and system logic, and leaving them exposed may engender novel forms of meta-humor. Therefore, studying computational processes through the lens of theories of humor may provide novel understandings in the field of computer science and computational linguistics. In a sense, this would mark a shift from *computational humor* to *humorous computation*.

"Humorous computational systems" inspired by the "Handbook" could be explicitly designed to reveal or parody their algorithmic nature, generating humor through the visible mechanics of their construction and operation. This taps into the human fascination with exposed mechanisms, as seen in watches (e.g., the Swatch GK100 Jellyfish wristwatch on display at the MoMA), computers (e.g., the original translucent iMac G3, also on display at the MoMA), or car gearboxes (e.g., the visible gearchange mechanism in the Lotus Emira). Other examples include quirky musical instruments (e.g., Wintergatan's Marble Machine), Rube Goldberg machines, and Theo Jansen's Strandbeests. In all these creations, the visible systems and processes are more captivating than their final output, like the melody produced or where an object lands.

Since current computational humor systems evaluate success based on user reactions to generated content (e.g., laughter or ratings of "funny"), this new approach would require developing new metrics that assess the humor embedded in computational structures, such as incongruity levels, randomness, or structural creativity.

Superiority theories of humor (Lintott, 2016) suggest that humans may laugh at machines when their "cold" logic or mechanical limitations appear inferior to human reasoning. However, computational systems that present their own processes and mechanisms as sources of humor, as well as the inherent absurdity of their existence and their interactions with humans, could invert this dynamic, making machines appear self-aware and relatable. This would challenge understandings and desired outcomes of human-machine interaction. Rather than striving to make machines more human, exposing their inner workings and non-humanity might make people perceive them as more relatable and therefore—paradoxically—as more human. While science strives to make AI and robots as similar as possible to real humans, those that humorously expose their computational logic and "non-humanness" might make technology feel less intimidating and more accessible, particularly for non-technical users.

These forms of *machine self-deprecating humor* that point at its combinatorial mechanisms, system inefficiencies, or their programmers' biases, may change how humans perceive and interact with machines. For example, interjecting self-reflective humorous comments at random intervals may give an AI a unique personality that shows "awareness" of its inner workings by exposing them through a sort of *humorous computational transparency* (for instance, in response to a user's negative feedback on the AI's output). As another example, an AI-generated voice assistant could intentionally switch to a robot-like voice to humorously express its flawed or unsatisfactory performance as a machine. This kind of revealing and self-referential humor by AI systems could also be used as an educational tool to demystify computational processes and concepts making them less intimidating and more engaging for students, especially when introducing them to fields like computer science, robotics, and artificial intelligence.

By implementing this approach, chatbots and robotic companions that generate humor by revealing their computational processes could feel more relatable, as some people may find "replicants" intimidating, if not outright creepy. This "see-through" approach to *humorous computational thinking* could transform how people interact with AI chatbots and robotic companions, and how they integrate them into their lives.

2.3 Broader Implications

Most computational humor research aims to mimic or reproduce human humor. Treating computing as a humor-generating mode suggests that algorithmic processes need not replicate human humor. Instead, they can "embrace" their own unique, mechanical absurdity, producing humor that is distinctly computational. This has the potential to change and expand not only what we find humorous as human beings, but the very understanding of humor itself, from *human-like* to *more-than-human*.

By focusing on structure and process, researchers can identify distinctly computational forms of humor, where the logic of systems generates a unique type of comedy that does not rely on replicating human expression. Here, examining computing as a humorous mode reveals the uniquely human ability to find humor in structural absurdity and mechanical logic. This contributes to philosophical and psychological discussions about what distinguishes humans from machines and how mechanical and computational processes can expand "humanness" by broadening modes of humor generation and enjoyment. More broadly, computational humor systems can reveal how humans relate to mechanized processes. Through this lens, computational humor moves beyond *imitation* to become a tool for *exploration* of what makes us smile—of what make us human.

3 Conclusion

The "Universal Handbook for Political Speeches" is more than a historical curiosity—it is a powerful case study in how *the algorithmic structuring of language* can be used as a mode of humor generation. Its analog design anticipates the computational methods used in modern language generation while serving as a timeless reminder of the power of humor to unmask authoritarian absurdity. Building on this foundation, this paper advocates for viewing computing as a mode of humor generation, where humor emerges from the structure and process itself rather than solely from the output. The "Handbook" demonstrates how modular structures, algorithms, and processes can engender humor, offering new ways to design systems that embrace the creative potential of computing rather than striving to replicate human-like humor. Finally, this approach can deepen our understanding of human-machine dynamics by emphasizing shared experiences of absurdity and creativity, in a fragile balance between *sequencing* and *randomness*, *order* and *chaos*.

Computational humor systems challenge us to rethink the nature of humor itself and the ways in which humans and machines can collaborate in playful and meaningful ways. At the dawn of artificial general intelligence, these systems offer a glimpse of a future where algorithms are not just *functional* but also *inspiring*, especially if we let their unequivocal, mechanistic non-humanness shine through.

4 Limitations

This position paper presents a conceptual framework for understanding computational humor as a generative mode rather than a tool, using the "Universal Handbook for Political Speeches" as a case study. However, the analysis relies on a single historical artifact, which, while illustrative, may limit the generalizability of the arguments to contemporary computational humor systems. The absence of empirical testing or concrete implementation of the proposed ideas means that their practical applicability and effectiveness remain speculative. Furthermore, the paper does not extensively address how these ideas might interact with the latest advances in neural network-based language models, natural language processing, computational linguistics, or multimodal humor systems. Finally, as a position paper, it does not engage directly with broader ethical implications, such as how the use of computational humor might shape human-machine interactions in unintended ways. Of course, these limitations also represent doors open to further reflection and interdisciplinary research.

References

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Appendix A

I	II	III	IV
Dear colleagues	the execution of outlined programmatic tasks	compels us to analyze	the current administrative and financial conditions
on the other hand	the scope and location of worker training	plays a crucial role in defining	further directions of development
similarly	the continuous quantitative growth and range of our activities	necessitates specification and clarification of	a universal participatory system
but let us not forget that	the current organizational structure	facilitates the preparation and construction of	participants' attitudes toward organizational tasks
in this way	the new organizational activity model	ensures the participation of a wide group in shaping	new proposals
because daily experience shows us that	the continuous development of various activity forms	plays a significant role in establishing	progressive educational directives
and the importance of these issues is self-evident, because	the ongoing informational and propagandistic protection of our activities	efficiently enables the creation of	a training system tailored to workers' needs
hence, the rich and varied experience of	the effort to strengthen and develop effective structures	highlights the importance of appreciating	suitable activation conditions
furthermore, the organizational focus, which includes	the consultation with a broad active base	serves as an intriguing test for the evaluation of	a new developmental model
therefore, this ideological premise expressed by	the initiation of a general process that reshapes attitudes	leads to a process of introducing and modernizing	advanced forms of action