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“Duchamping in Game Making”: An Analysis of Pippin Barr’s Parodic Computer Games
by Devin Wilson

Introduction:
“We need some Duchamping in game making”, said game designer and researcher Pippin Barr in a February 2012 interview. This statement, of course, is in reference to Marcel Duchamp, who revolutionized the world’s understanding of art with the submission of his work *Fountain* to the 1917 Society of Independent Artists exhibit. *Fountain* was a urinal that had been purchased, turned on its side, and signed, but its effect on the ontology of art reached much further than an everyday plumbing fixture would have been expected to.

Pippin Barr and Marcel Duchamp have a lot in common. They’re both interested in shocking the conventional conceptions of their disciplines in humorous ways, and—given Duchamp’s well-documented fascination with chess—we can also say that they’re both interested in games.

Barr’s browser-based games with low-resolution graphics stand in stark contrast to the high-definition commodities that are peddled by the traditional computer game industry. If that wasn’t enough, Barr also eschews seemingly unalienable game design conventions in service of game-mechanical jokes, and it is this commitment to parody that merits a close look in this paper.

In *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, Janet Murray identified four qualities of digital media. She noted that works in the genre are necessarily *encyclopedic, participatory, procedural, and spatial*.

Though I strongly agree with Ian Bogost’s efforts to emphasize the procedurality of the medium, participation is also an essential quality of interactive media, especially games. It is this quality that I will examine in a number of the games created by Pippin Barr, as I think he makes some of his most compelling advances on those grounds.

Pippin Barr’s games are often quite referential, whether the reference be to millennia-old mythology, pop cultural memes, or contemporary digital games. It is this intertextuality that gives Barr license to experiment with what Douglas Wilson and Miguel Sicart call “abusive game design”. Douglas Wilson has argued in his PhD dissertation that such a practice requires “surprise, humor, and context”, and while most of Pippin Barr’s games tend to be great examples of all three of these qualities, I argue that one game in particular demonstrates this “context” exceptionally well. This game is the subject of my first section, which I call “Modified Participation”.

Modified Participation in *Ludwig Von Beatdown*

Barr’s game *Ludwig Von Beatdown* is a direct reference to a game designed by Douglas

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7 Pippin Barr, *Ludwig Von Beatdown*,


Wilson. This game by Wilson, named *Johann Sebastian Joust*[^6], is a rare example of a digital game with no video output. In *J.S. Joust*, players use Sony’s PlayStation Move controllers: small, wireless “wands” with a programmable LED light at the top. Each player is given one of these controllers, and music by the composer J.S. Bach plays at varying speeds. When the music is slow, the controller is very sensitive to movement, requiring players to be very careful with their controllers, as he or she will be eliminated from play if the device is moved beyond a certain threshold. When the music speeds up, the sensitivity is reduced and players can move more freely. The winner is the last player remaining of the 2 to 7 participants allowed at the beginning of the game.

Of course, these game mechanics—implemented as they are in real space rather than a virtual arena—lend themselves to a kind of aggressive physical play not common to digital games. The limits of such tactics are meant to be set by the “play communities”[^9] that decide to engage with the game, as Douglas Wilson encourages people to draft house rules to determine the lengths to which people can physically interact with each other[^10].

The typical experience of *J.S. Joust* is one that is exclusive to the physicality afforded by its unusual setup. Pippin Barr’s *Ludwig Von Beatdown*, on the other hand, modifies the core conceit of *J.S. Joust* into the much more conventional form of a videogame. With a normal keyboard, the player of *Ludwig Von Beatdown* controls an on-screen avatar and competes with other players who are also represented on the screen. Where *J.S. Joust* seeks to mimic the forms of sports and folk games[^11], *Ludwig Von Beatdown* tries to be an 80’s sports videogame[^12], taking *J.S. Joust* as its point of reference rather than the sports that are typically represented in such a form. The result is a (deliberately) oversimplified game that loses nearly all of the distinctive qualities of the original, but presents something new in its own right.

Barr’s game allows for up to two human players, with each player using different sets of keys for movement, but this is a far cry from the infinite variations of athletic multiplayer dynamics in Wilson’s game. In fact, Barr’s game can be “played” with zero human players, having all of the on-screen contestants controlled automatically by the computer.

Furthermore, Barr’s adaptation is no more immediately social than any other game that is playable on the same device by more than one player at a time. Players of *Ludwig Von Beatdown* could jostle each other away from the keyboard they’re sharing, but this is a possibility for any local multiplayer experience and it would generally be seen as unsporting (except in a game like *Brutally Unfair Tactics Totally OK Now*, another game Douglas Wilson contributed to the design of).

With *Ludwig Von Beatdown*, one could conceivably set up house rules with a partner stipulating that hitting each others’ keys or pushing one another was acceptable, but the software itself is no more flexible than your average computer game. Michael Liebe points out that

[^9]: Bernie DeKoven, *The Well-Played Game* (San Jose: Writers Club Press, 2002), Page 21

[^9]: http://www.jsjoust.com/presskit/#background
computer game players “simply have no other choice than to act within the frame of the possibilities provided by the computer program”\textsuperscript{13}. While \textit{J.S. Joust} is technically a computer game, its play experience is not subject to the same rigid computational structures that Barr’s parodic videogame is. The actions observable in a session of \textit{J.S. Joust} are not dictated exclusively by the explicit possibilities and limitations of its digital code: its participants are free to employ any number of subtle or creative actions, so long as they’re in line with any house rules decided upon by the game’s immediate community. In Barr’s game, however, there is no room for such liberal improvisation. The player can only do what is allowed by the prescribed digital inputs and the algorithms written by Barr beforehand.

The reason this is significant is because it highlights the limiting nature of conventional digital games. Even though the two titles by Wilson and Barr have a lot in common on the surface, comparing the experiences of \textit{J.S. Joust} and \textit{Ludwig Von Beatdown} reveal that there is an antisocial poverty of play in the former, a point not lost on Barr\textsuperscript{14}.

This deliberately underwhelming adaptation of a truly social game transforms into a successful parody of computer games in general. Traditional computer games do not offer us the same social experiences as other kinds of games, as the multiplayer experience tends to be so heavily mediated that we have fewer reasons to appreciate whether we’re playing against someone sitting next to us, someone miles away, or a computer-controlled opponent. It is only through peripheral cues (like trash talk, the belief that we’re playing against a real human online, etc) that we have any indication that we’re forming any play communities at all, and there is quite a difference between sitting across a chess board from someone and looking at the same video monitor as them.

**Mundane Participation in \textit{The Artist is Present}**

While \textit{Ludwig Von Beatdown} could be said to be a hyper-ordinary rendition of \textit{J.S. Joust}, a number of Pippin Barr’s games are even more explicit explorations of the mundane. In what is likely his best-known work, \textit{The Artist is Present}\textsuperscript{15}, Barr mimics (in videogame form) the Marina Abramovic performance of the same name. In Abramovic’s 2010 performance, she sat in a chair in New York City’s Museum of Modern Art, and individual audience members could come and sit across from her as long as they liked, the two people simply being present. Abramovic, one of the most notable performance artists in the history of the genre, turns non-performance into a performance, and the same tactic is at work in Barr’s adaptation of the piece.

Art critic and philosopher Arthur Danto described Abramovic’s performance as a kind of dialogue, despite the fact that he and the performer were both silent when he experienced the piece\textsuperscript{16}. Having the same lack of verbal dialogue with Pippin Barr when playing his adaptation of


\textsuperscript{15} Pippin Barr, \textit{The Artist is Present}, http://www.pippinbarr.com/games/theartistispresent/TheArtistIsPresent.html

the performance, we find the kind of dialogue that is described in Douglas Wilson’s dissertation as a “playful rivalry”\(^\text{17}\) between the player and game designer.

In the videogame, the pixelated player character approaches the doors of the Museum of Modern Art, and—in a manner that would make proponents of realism in games blush—he or she is only permitted entry during the MoMA’s real-world operating hours. Depending on what time of day the game is played, the first opportunity for non-performance may present itself immediately, this being the need to wait until business hours for the opportunity to progress into the virtual museum.

However, if the museum is open, the player may enter with no difficulty. There is no troll at the door, no dragon waiting inside. Aside from low-resolution renderings of works like Van Gogh’s *Starry Night*, there is just a queue for tickets, a queue for the (non-)performance, and the (non-)performance itself.

Even the act of navigating in *The Artist is Present* is an exercise in non-performance; the avatar moves automatically without the user needing to hold down the appropriate key. You simply give your on-screen representation a direction and it moves that way until it needs to stop because of the environment. The typical gaming activities of holding down a (combination of) button(s) to run into combat, frantically hitting other buttons to destroy enemies, and competing against the terrible forces of evil are replaced by waiting and the utterly banal (yet indispensable) strategies involved in buying tickets, waiting in line, and sitting in a chair.

It’s not as though *The Artist is Present* is a total non-game, though; we can easily interpret victory as the state of sitting across from the low-resolution Abramovic. There are rules to follow, as well. You have to wait your turn, as trying to force your way ahead of the people in line will result in your removal from the premises. The game also tests the player’s skills, albeit unusual ones. While most videogames ask us to kill and loot, *The Artist is Present* asks us to be patient, respect our neighbors, and wait in line. Also, this waiting is not accommodated by simply leaving the game running. One must step forward when the patron in front of you does so. It is ultimately a test of the player’s endurance, a theme we’ll see again in the following section.

**Mortifying Participation in Epic Sax Game and Let’s Play: Ancient Greek Punishment**

It is in what I call “Mortifying Participation” that we find Pippin Barr’s work at its most “abusive”, to recall the term from Wilson and Sicart’s piece. In their paper, they argue that abusive game design is “designed to break the ‘toolness’ of conventional game systems... The game object becomes a means for a dialogue, rather than an isolated tool for play”\(^\text{18}\). We see these kinds of abusive brokenness implemented to great effect in two of Barr’s games: *Epic Sax Game*\(^\text{19}\) and *Let’s Play: Ancient Greek Punishment*\(^\text{20}\).

*Epic Sax Game* allows the player to embody the supposed history of a popular internet meme, which goes by the name of “Epic Sax Guy”. “Epic Sax Guy” is derived from the


\(^{17}\) Wilson, Page 64.  
\(^{18}\) Wilson and Sicart.  
\(^{19}\) Pippin Barr, *Epic Sax Game*, http://www.pippinbarr.com/games/epicsaxgame/EpicSaxGame.html  
enthusiastic live performance of a saxophone riff in a song that was Moldova’s entry for the 2010 Eurovision song contest. The recording of this performance became very popular on YouTube, and eventually a video was uploaded that was just this riff repeated over and over for ten hours\(^1\) (the maximum allowed length of a YouTube video at that time).

In Barr’s game, you start by learning the riff in your apartment, playing the virtual saxophone using your keyboard. Then, you record your part in the studio, jam with the band, and perform the whole song on Eurovision. These performances are scored, and it is a fairly traditional rhythm game for these sections, but with the inevitable comedic flavor of being based on an internet meme.

However, the final stage of the game is undoubtedly the most interesting part. In this challenge, you’re asked to perform the saxophone riff over and over for ten hours straight, in a strange, performative perversion of the ten-hour video that was uploaded to YouTube. The action is framed in a simulated YouTube window, and the player receives feedback in the form of virtual “Likes”, views, and comments.

This grueling gameplay conceit is obviously subversive, but it is not without precedent. \textit{Penn and Teller’s Smoke and Mirrors}\(^2\) is an unreleased game for the Sega CD game console, and it featured a collection of gag mini-games, including the infamous \textit{Desert Bus}. In \textit{Desert Bus}, you are tasked with driving an empty bus from Tucson, Arizona to Las Vegas, Nevada. The bus cannot exceed 45 miles per hour, and—despite the road being completely straight—the bus veers to the right, demanding the player’s constant input for the trip, which takes eight hours of real time and cannot be paused. If the bus goes off the road, it is towed back to its origin, also in real time. Completing the journey earns the player just a single point for his or her score. This mini-game has reached such levels of infamy that it is regularly played for charity, and it’s easy to imagine it being an influence on \textit{Epic Sax Game}, as well as \textit{The Artist is Present}, which similarly requires constant attention from the player over many, monotonous hours.

Pippin Barr’s \textit{Let’s Play: Ancient Greek Punishment} is an offering of five different mini-games based on Greek mythology. The mini-games are labelled Sisyphus, Tantalus, Prometheus, Danaids, and Zeno, and if one is familiar with their analogues, the content of the mini-games comes as both a huge surprise and no surprise at all. No attempt has been made to turn these stories into good games; they’re adapted as faithfully and torturously as could be. As Sisyphus, you must push a boulder up a hill only to watch it roll back down to the bottom. Food and water evade Tantalus’s reach. Prometheus must endure the eagle attacking his liver, only to have it repair overnight for another round of pain on the next day. The Danaids mini-game forces you to fill an ever-emptying pot with water, and Zeno’s paradox challenges the player to reach a goal by moving halfway there \textit{ad infinitum}.

To be certain, these mini-games are impossible to win. However, within this unusual mode of game design exists a fascinating opportunity for tragedy and other rhetorics, as has been argued by Shuen-Shing Lee\(^3\). These games are a radical departure from modern

\(^{1}\)“Epic sax guy 10 hours”, YouTube, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kxopViU98Xo
\(^{2}\)Absolute Entertainment, \textit{Penn and Teller’s Smoke and Mirrors} (1995).
\(^{3}\)Shuen-Shing Lee, “I Lose, Therefore I Think”, \textit{Game Studies} 3, no. 2 (December 2003), http://www.gamestudies.org/0302/lee/
single-player computer games, which have become dominated by a tendency to allow only two outcomes for the player: win, or win later (a trend spoofed in Barr’s *All’s Well That Ends Well*\(^\text{24}\)). This tendency, as documented by Steven Conway\(^\text{25}\), results in an oppressive lack of agency, one that has transformed game players into merely game consumers.

But is what we find in Barr’s games an equally oppressive tendency, just from the other direction? No, because these games presented by Barr (for free, which makes a difference) offer both parody and dialogue, giving rise to relief and a kind of liberation when compared to the existing computer game landscape.

While winning *Let’s Play: Ancient Greek Punishment* is impossible and completing the final stage of *Epic Sax Game* is basically intolerable, neither of these games could be called unfair, exactly. Barr’s intent is quite intelligible via the game’s rules, and this makes all the difference, according to Douglas Wilson. Wilson argues in reference to a brutally difficult *Super Mario World* modification, “A game system that is woefully imbalanced by accident is often frustrating, but a game that appears intentionally imbalanced can be something more... We imagine the person behind the game, and thereby take their provocations personally”\(^\text{26}\). As players of these games, we can place ourselves in a kind of dialogue with Barr, understanding that these challenges are given to us with a wink and a nod. The result is not frustration but elation, perhaps only because we can laughingly say to ourselves, “He doesn’t actually expect me to do this, right?”

**Conclusion:**

In “From Parody to Politics”, the concluding section of *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler says, “all signification takes place within the orbit of the compulsion to repeat; ‘agency,’ then, is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition.”\(^\text{27}\)

While Butler is speaking of essentialist gender binaries and the political struggles associated with such a concern, we can responsibly appropriate her valorization of parody as a liberating force in game design as well. Pippin Barr’s games succeed like Duchamp’s *Fountain* did by deconstructing the assumptions surrounding the ideal form of a computer game, such as the notions that games need to be fun or even winnable. Where Butler’s variation on repetition is a more overtly social practice, Barr’s variations on familiar game mechanics and structures are similarly radical and afford a much-needed freedom to the game design community.

Barr’s subversions, particularly those focused on modes of participation, make for a liberating destabilization of the ontology of games, which is necessary for computer games to have a chance at evolving into something less spectacularly consumeristic. His use of Douglas Wilson’s strategies of surprise, humor, and especially context make for games that let us laugh at ourselves, as well as the very category of games. Perhaps Barr’s work is an answer to

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\(^{25}\) Steven Conway, “We Used to Win, We Used to Lose, We Used to Play: Simulacra, Hypo-Ludicity and the Lost Art of Losing”, *Westminster Papers* 9, no. 1 (October 2012): 29–46.

\(^{26}\) Wilson, Page 64.

Alexander Galloway's call for "countergaming"\textsuperscript{26}, a term wishfully coined in his book that predates Barr's now-prolific game design practice.

\textsuperscript{26} Alexander Galloway, "Countergaming", \textit{Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), Pages 107-126.