Review: *The Stuff Games Are Made Of,* by Pippin Barr. 2023. MIT Press. 184 pp.

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"Hey there, fashionista!" my sister-in-law sighs as she hands her smartphone to her son. It is 4 p.m., and we are gathered to celebrate a family birthday. The screen glows, soundtracked by Balearic synths, bringing an Ibiza vibe to the awkward lull of family gatherings.

I quickly join my nephew on Roblox's *Dress to Impress* (Dress to Impress Group, 2023), where we prepare our avatars for the virtual runway. In minutes, my impossibly thin avatar sports acrylic nails, balayage extensions, fluffy leg warmers, and an ushanka, in my attempt to interpret the "snow bunny" theme voted on by my fellow fashionistas.

The core gameplay mechanic of *Dress to Impress* turns on this deliberation among players, from initially selecting the theme for the look to assessing how well each person *serves* the theme. An unspoken dialogue, transmitted through my oscillation between the "cowboy" and "magica" poses to best accentuate my leg warmers, forms the most immediately legible sense of play at hand.

Rarely outside of game studies is this type of play understood as being in conversation with what experimental designer and developer Pippin Barr calls the "stuff" of games. As Susan Leigh Star (1999) observes, the infrastructure that underpins much of our encounters with emergent media like video games is inherently inconspicuous: it becomes noticeable only when it fails as in the case of glitches, bugs, or a loss of server connection. The interrelated and underlying parts, both material and conceptual, are not often the point of departure for discussing what we understand games to be. In his book *The Stuff Games Are Made Of*, Barr (2023) offers an insightful and joyous meditation on exactly what constitutes that "stuff."

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The term "stuff" is deliberately left open. Barr leverages the speculative value of the term to provoke deeper engagement with how we approach gaming. Just as anthropologist Daniel Miller (2010) explores how everyday objects are shaped by cultural contexts, Barr applies this concept to games, particularly within the context of his own work as a designer. The structure of the book reflects this theme. Each chapter focuses on a different fundamental component of video games, with the book split into two parts: the first half leans heavily into Barr's use of a metaphor borrowed from Donald Schön (1992)—a "conversation with materials" which, for Barr, is understood as the "experience of deeply engaging with the tools and media" he uses to make his games (p. 5). This section encompasses topics such as rules, interface, and graphics. The second half turns toward more conceptual themes, such as time, violence, and money.

That being said, Barr takes care to point out that his initial intuition is not to "theorise games as media" (p. 4). Rather, he adopts a practice-based approach: an empathetic engagement and dialogue with his own work that offers the "chance to think of game making as collaborating with an equal rather than using a tool" and seeks to illuminate some of the fundamental questions that arise during the design process (p. 40).

One of the book's standout chapters is "Computation." The section opens with the observation that "we rarely consider whether our computers are enjoying themselves," noting that computation is almost always used, within the context of games, to serve the player (p. 30). He notes that there is a history of games playing themselves, predominantly within the context of improving computer science.

In Barr's game *Let's Play: Ancient Greek Punishment: CPU Edition!* (2022), the classic mythological figure of Sisyphus is subjected to his eternal torment of pushing a boulder uphill. However, in this case, no human player is involved as the computer itself endlessly performs the task. He elaborates his intention in removing player input by highlighting the interaction between his "tireless CPU Sisyphus" and the game's underlying computational processes (p. 36). Without a human player, attention shifts to the machine's continuous execution. The "electrons flowing through logic gates on processor chips; the heat generated" (p. 33) by CPU Sisyphus' endless task opens a "window of empathy between us and the machines that do our bidding" (p. 42). This window widens when considered alongside the program's built-in potential for failure. Although the relevant code is never executed, since the program always calls the function to push the boulder, its presence is structurally necessary. As Barr notes, code describes a program's possibilities. Including the condition for failure, even if unreachable, allows the system to mirror the stakes of the human player's capacity to fail.

The possibility for failure is what renders CPU Sisyphus a player of a game rather than a program with some algorithmic utility and is

simultaneously what makes Barr's utilisation of the myth of Sisyphus make sense. In something of a reterritorialization of the player and the myth to the realm of computation, Barr re-codes (literally and metaphorically) Western myth and the nature of play to the materiality and processes of digital systems. Barr's understanding of being in dialogue with the "stuff" of games shines through. Just as one might empathise with Sisyphus while reading Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942/1991), Barr reflects on the novel insights that arise from considering computation in unexpected yet familiar contexts, drawing parallels to his own empathetic response to CPU Sisyphus.

Being in dialogue, however, is not limited to empathetic engagement. In discussing game rules, Barr references an iteration of his game *PONGS* titled *Viennese Pong* (2022), where players must declare if they are in Vienna, since the game cannot be played outside of the city. Even if players lie, Barr argues that the game can only truly be "Viennese" if played physically in Vienna. He observes that "game rules don't only exist at the level of code, with paddles changing size or balls leaving trails. They are just as strongly enforced through social contracts" (p. 21). This concept certainly applies in *Dress to Impress* as well. While I could choose to create a Rococo look, the community-elected theme of "snow bunny" dictates that, unless I interpret my avatar as a Rococo snow bunny, I likely will not receive the highest marks on the runway.

This chapter also sets a precedent for the book's overall style, which is perhaps its greatest asset. Barr approaches what he calls "awkward ideas" first as a designer but then engages with them in a manner reminiscent of the dialogical style prevalent in literary and philosophical discourse since antiquity (p. 96). He does not treat his work as a static end-product; rather, he acknowledges the potential of an empathetic engagement with the "stuff" as generative of new modes of thinking about play. His practice reflects a heartfelt respect for his commitment to the work.

This respect is further evidenced in the third chapter, where Barr refers to AI designed for procedurally generated Mario Bros levels, noting that "they [the computers running AI software] play their games to expand our human understanding of specific approaches to machine learning. The aim is a better algorithm, not a happier one" (p. 31). There are significant implications to thinking empathetically with computers. Considering the "stuff" inevitably leads to questions of algorithmic bias, digital learning, economic asymmetries, healthcare infrastructure, data colonialism, and the ecological consequences of our digital world. Barr's call to be in dialogue with the "stuff" is how Barr best reflects on the key throughline across the ten chapters: a confrontation "with the underlying nature of the software" found all around us (p. 40). As Walter Benjamin (1923/2005) famously referred to the translator's work as venturing into the in-between spaces where languages and meanings

orbit in a sacred conversation, Barr similarly ventures into the space between binary ones and zeros that fill our lives.

As I exit the experience and close the Roblox app on my phone, I am left thinking about global fast fashion trends and the centuries-long development of clichés that inform the voting on the runway. Deleuze (1981/2004) once pointed out, in writing on Francis Bacon, that the artist (or in this case fashionista) never truly starts with a blank canvas. The gravity of tradition pulls us toward a generic expression, even if the theme is "rococo snow bunny." This sort of reflection is exactly what Barr does best in *The Stuff Games Are Made Of*: highlighting the often invisible or underthought aspects of gaming and expanding them into interdisciplinary insights, from a virtual gallery of water graphics to Marina Abramović's downtime sautéing onions. As we sing happy birthday and eat cake with Grandma, I know my nephew and I will be back to playing shortly after and still thinking about the "stuff."

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