It is as if you were playing chess (2016)

The evolution of...

Pippin Barr x Devolution

readme.md

This is the process documentation for the game *It is as if you were playing chess* (2016) by Pippin Barr.

- Read the **Press Kit** (Chapter 1) for more details on the game and press information
- Read the **Design Journal** (Chapter 2) for high-level reflections on the design and development process
- Read the **Blog Posts** (Chapter 3) for public-facing writings while creating the game
- Read the **Commit History** (Chapter 4) for detailed, moment-to-moment insights into the development process
- Look at the **File Structure** (Chapter 5) for the evolution of the source code
- Loot at **Press** (Chapter 6) to read others writing about the game

A note on the text

The text has been edited for print, but remains as close to the original as possible. Its main purpose is to provide the original material for exploration, the data is preserved *as is* and not updated.
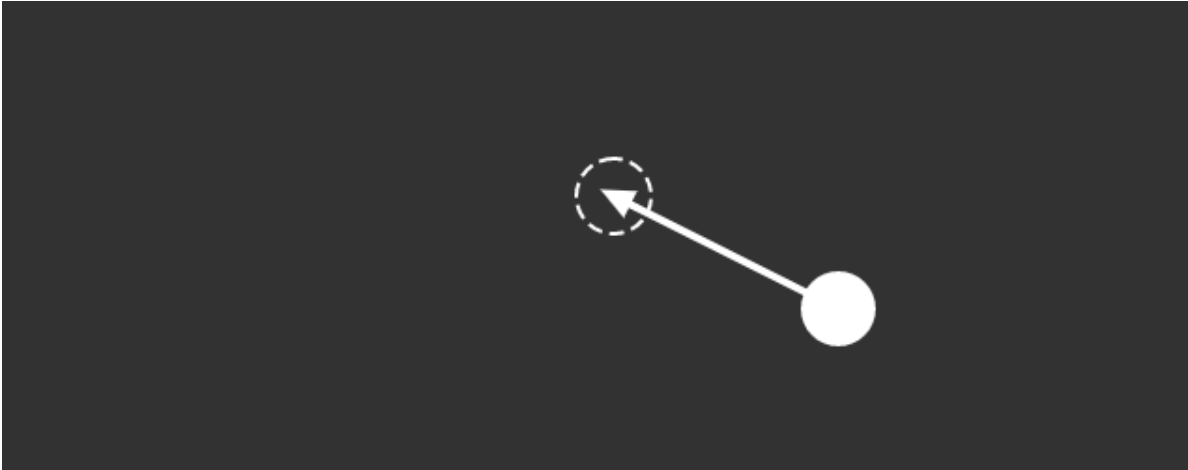
The original project was already accompanied by a process documentation, but not developed with the help of a repository, only uploaded to one later (2022).

It is as if you were...

See: *Love*

1 Press Kit

Info

Play Online[1] (desktop and mobile)

Description

You've always wanted to be a chess master! But you aren't one! Are you! Now you can at least look like one! Pretend you're playing chess! Make moves! Act like you feel things! Smirk! Frown! Weep! Chess!

It is as if you were playing chess was written in JavaScript/HTML5 using the Phaser game framework. It's a game that allows you to pretend to be playing chess. You know, impress your friends and strangers on the metro...

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[1]pippinbarr.com/it-is-as-if-you-were-playing-chess/

Press Kit

Information

- Released: August, 2016
- Website: http://www.pippinbarr.com/games/
- Platforms: Browser
- Link: https://www.pippinbarr.com/it-is-as-if-you-were-playing-chess/
- Price: Free.

History

"It is as if you were playing chess" is part of a larger project I'm calling "It is as if you were playing a videogame". In both, the idea is to create games that aren't game in themselves, per se, but allow/force/encourage the player to act as if they're playing a game of some kind. The central image for me in this is that of a player sitting at their computer or using their mobile device while be observed by another person. To the observer it should look as though the player is genuinely playing some kind of game. In this case the idea is for them to look as though they are playing a game of chess, making the appropriate motions (to drag chess pieces around), facial expressions, eye movements, and so on. "It is as if you were playing chess" is thus an interface designed to support you in pretending that you're playing a game of chess.

Whether I will ever succeed in creating the more general "It is as if you were playing a videogame" is less certain. "It is as if you were playing chess" is valuable as it provides a simple way of testing out the idea of an interface as a kind of game or game-referring experience. Chess, the game, provides a well-known set of movements and emotional experiences that most players should be able to "play along with" and thus "get" what the interface is doing. Importantly, in the case of this game, there is actually an underlying game of chess you are playing through as you follow the instructions, although only the white side of the moves are actually stored in the game. I pursued this angle, rather than completely random moves, to avoid the dissonance that would be created by either impossible moves or incredibly unlikely moves, for those who play enough chess to think through what is happening, much more abstractly, on the screen.

Features

- Being told what to do.
- Being told how to act.
- Being told where to look.
- Chess?

Images

✕
**look
here**

Absently itch your neck, then cringe.

Raise your left eyebrow and breathe out suddenly.

Shake your head and bite your lip.

Credits

- Pippin Barr: Everything

2 journal.md

Thursday, 11 August 2016

Made quite a lot of progress on this yesterday evening in the end. Have the basic UI and interaction working. Mostly need to insert the underlying chess game(s) and then come up with a way to generate emotional cues at the bottom, most likely through Tracery for some variety with a grammar. Then it'd be done because it just ain't that complex babe.

Sunday, 14 August 2016

Todos:

- Work on the emotion timing, right now it feels too fast and kind of out of synch
  - (But also think about how it will affect the game over stuff.)
- Add a "look here" symbol that plays between moves, moves around, probably an arrow or X

Issues:

- Dragging super fast at beginning leaves arrow faded in
  - SEEMS TO HAVE VANISHED? Possible to have both events be null on showGameOver
  - No, still possible for both events to be null (co-incided with arrow faded in once)
- Seems to be if you manage to end the game before any emotion?
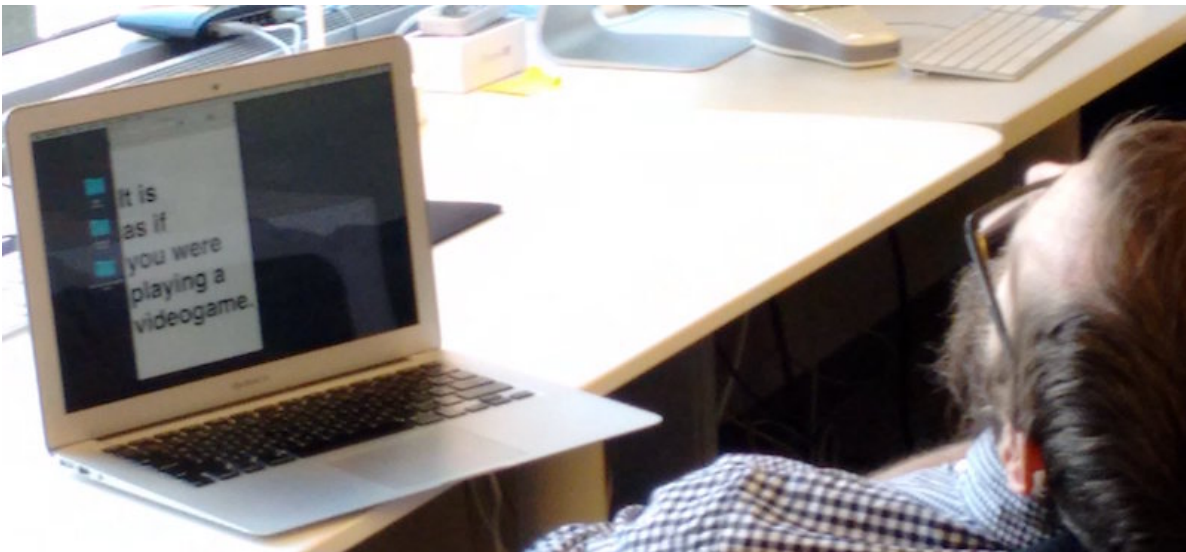- Super fast drag to game over leave dashed line unfaded
- Use minimal phaser build

Tuesday, 16 August 2016

Release

3 blog-posts.md

Here are public-facing blog posts I wrote while creating the game.

New Project: It is as if you were playing a videogame (2016-06-16)

(Image credit: Dietrich Squinkifer)

I tried to relax for a couple of days after polishing off *Let's Play: Ancient Greek Punishment: Limited Edition* (coming next Tuesday!) but I felt weird and out of sorts. It's probably a little bit depressing, but at present I find it stressful to just detune and not work on a game/thing. I've started reading Gertrude Stein's "The Making of Americans" (so far so, so hard to read) and I thought I'd just spend a day doing that. But no. Just listless wandering around the house, checking Twitter too much, answering emails, etc.

So I decided to just plow on ahead and have been giving some thought to the next project on my list, which is called *It is as if you were playing a videogame.* (The photo above, by Squinky, would make a great "genesis image", but sadly I'd already thought of the game name by then and had written it in a text document to see what it could look like on a mobile device. Still, I like the idea that my "design process" might just be "looking like I'm asleep".)

The genesis of this particular game idea came on the metro looking at all the people with their phones and tablets, deeply engrossed, moving their fingers around on the screens mystically. Being perverse, I liked the idea that somehow they were all actually doing nothing at all, but rather following banal instructions to "interact" with their device in such a way as to look like they were playing a game (or whatever else they might appear to be doing).

So that's the plan with *It is as if you were playing a videogame* – it is to be a game that enables you to pretend (to others, perhaps even to yourself?) that you are playing a videogame. In some ways I also think of this as some sort of bizarre futuristic anxiety-support tool, allowing you to exist in a social space and appear to be busy at a socially sanctioned activity while in fact not really doing anything. (Why wouldn't you just actually play a game? I don't quite know, perhaps it would just be too stressful? Perhaps you don't want to have real [game] emotions in public?)

This is all ties in with a longer-standing interest in making an abstract game that doesn't rely on any narrative or world building properties for its graphics/text/aesthetics, but only has basic shapes and movements (e.g. "drag the circle to position (x,y)"). In fact the whole thing is more an exercise in interface design than game design because I want to explicitly avoid (as much as is possible in this weird situation) having it feel "like a game" in a more traditional sense. The affect of play/success/failure/tension etc. should all be as *fake* as possible, I think.

Anyway, that's where my thinking is for the moment. No doubt it will evolve/devolve as I move along with it. Be seeing you.

New (old) Project: It is as if you were playing chess (2016-08-10)

Turning my mind back to the world of making the videogames. A while back I ~~announced a new project~~ called *It is as if you are playing a videogame.* I spent a bit of time thinking about it before I made *Independence, Missouri* and one of the big struggles was how to think of it as a single, unified game. Bits and pieces of different ideas kept shuffling around as I tried to fix it in place – notably the question of how you generically represent "videogame" in abstract mechanics.

So, as a way to tunnel in, I thought I'd make one of the more specific versions I've been thinking about: chess. Thus, *It is as if you were playing chess* has been born and is underway. It's much easier, because the overriding idea of "pretend you're playing a game" is much more straightforwardly expressed with a known game with know inputs and outcomes like this. It lets me get at a few of the key ideas without getting lost in side-tracks.

Those key ideas as I see them right now revolve around the idea of "performing" a game without actually playing it. So you look like you're playing chess, but actually you're just performing quite abstract movements and expressions with your device. The game explicitly tells you what movements to make with your hands (using the mouse or on a touch screen) and also instructs you on how you should appear emotionally. In this way, all of "chess" is there as far as an observer might be concerned, but of course you're not actually playing chess at all.

Making it be chess specifically also helps on the "visualisation" side of the game, which has been a tricky element for the design of the more abstract "videogame", version. If you're performing this abstract inputs, you'll connect them to the idea of a "real" underlying game. If the game is telling you to make gestures with your mouse, clicking and dragging shapes around, you'll probably associate that to the idea you're moving pieces in an invisible "real game of chess". As such, a decent chess player would be able to tell that the game wasn't really reflective if I made the movements completely arbitrary. With the chess version, I *can* insert an underlying game of chess that you play through – you don't decide the moves of course, you just make them when instructed, but they *are from a legal game of chess*, so you don't have that kind of dissonance that could be created.

That's where I'm at with it. Hoping this will be pretty straightforward to develop and release quite soon. I have a bunch of basic interface stuff implemented and mostly need to insert the real chess game and think about the "emotion instructor" part of it all.

Hope you're well, say hi to the kids for me.

Invisible Realism (2016-08-17)

(Excuse me while I push through the pain and write a quick post about something or other.)

While I was writing the press kit for *It is as if you were playing chess* (out Friday!) I reminded myself of the fact that the game features a real underlying game of chess. The rationale for that is that if you're making these abstract "chess moves" with the interface, even someone not very

attuned to chess might be able to notice if the moves were essentially generated at random. Like, "hang on, there isn't even a piece on that square right now" or "there is literally no piece that can move like that". Rather than write sufficient code to generate plausible moves, I just imported the move of pre-existing (and famous, as it happens) chess games. Because otherwise, even if you make sure the game shows *legal* moves it might still show *stupid* moves, and nobody wants to play *It is as if you were playing chess and were not very good at it at all*. (Although, having written that title, I'm like…)

Anyway, the game contains the moves (for white) of three classic chess matches, such that when you make the abstract moves there's a sense in which you're "really playing chess" I suppose, but also not, since nowhere in the game are the moves for black, for example. So you're not really. But there *is* a kind of ground realism for the moves you make under there. And I like that idea that even in a deeply meaningless-looking interface there can still be seriousness below the surface. In fact it also refers back to *Best Chess* for me – in that game it looked to a large extent like nothing at all was happening, but in fact under the hood the game was literally working on *solving chess*, not just pretending to. That kind of authenticity is, I think, oddly powerful. Perhaps all the more so in this world of online games and especially JavaScript where, if people want to, they can pretty easily *check* what's going on in the innards of a game they're playing. (Unless I went out of my way to obfuscate it, which I don't. See also: *Leaderboarder* for hilarity involving players and code.)

Do I have a point? I'm not 100% sure I do, but I do like internal authenticity and "responsibility" in games, games that don't just pretend something is happen, but "do the work" beneath the surface, even if it's invisible?

Anyway, don't mind me.

It is as if you were playing chess: Is it a game? (2016-09-01)

While working on the course I teach on game making this semester, I got to thinking about the old, (bitter?) chestnut of game definitions, and I found myself wondering whether a pseudo-game such as *It is as if you were playing chess* meets the definition of a game or not. So, with the help of the excellent Jesper Juul, who wrote a *nicely modular and clear definition of 'game'*[1], let's see…

1. Fixed rules.

Seems legit. We definitely have rules, even visible in the above screenshot from the game – the rules are that you drag circles into destinations.

2. Variable and quantifiable outcomes.

Uh-oh? So this gets at the reason I thought this might be an interesting exercise, because *It is as if you were playing chess* is a 'game' that *contains* a game in some sense. Although the

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[1] jesperjuul.net/text/gameplayerworld

player isn't specifically aware of it, the chess game she is going through the motions of (or 'performing') has a quantifiable outcome (a draw, or black or white wins). Furthermore, it's variable because the chess game you're playing through is randomised (not that you influence this outcome as a player).

Even furthermore, if we look at the meta-game of performance, we could claim there are variable outcomes, because the game always ends on an implied emotional tone, randomly generated by the game's grammar. (Although the emotional tone implied at the end does not necessarily match the actual result of the game being performed, which is unknown to the game in the first place.)

3. Valorisation of the outcome.

Following on from the above, it's clear that the outcomes are valorised as well to the extent that in the underlying chess game it's desirable to win (presumably), and to the extent that the final emotional tone implies a valence above the ending of the game, even if it's maybe up to the interpretation of the player whether that implication seems to be "good" or "bad".

4. Player effort.

This one is a problem I think. The obvious actions you take in *It is as if you were playing chess* are trivial, just dragging a circle to a destination. On the other hand, the performative element of the game, striking the appropriate poses with your body and expressions with your face, isn't trivial at all and could be said to involve player effort. In a cute way, we might say that the player's performance even "influences the outcome of the game", because it will shape the player's affect and emotional connection to the game's imagined end over time. On the other hand, Juul's definition doesn't seem to strictly *require* having an influence over the outcome (e.g. games of chance).

5. Attachment of the player to the outcome.

This seems entirely possible to claim for the game. Even when pretending to play chess, we might imagine that one wants to pretend to win? Or perhaps we could even become attached to other performative outcomes, like appearing to lose, or appearing to go through a great struggle during play. Such outcomes are admittedly mostly defined by the player, but it's in collaboration with the emotional and spatial cues provided by the game.

6. Negotiable consequences.

It seems fairly clear that *It is as if you were playing chess* could be "*optionally* assigned real-life consequences" – its actions/moves are indeed "predominantly harmless", as all you do is move shapes around on a screen and do some acting (unless you perhaps find the acting itself traumatic I suppose). So you could negotiate any kind of consequences for the game you might want – you might agree to act as if your imagined result of the game affects your whole day afterwards, for example, or you might bet money on the game's outcome, deciding whether you won or lost at the end!

So having gone through with that exercise, it seems like *It is as if you were playing chess* is a game. So there?

Update: *Jesper Juul says it's not a game*[2], my world is in ruins around me. But I've always kind of liked post-apocalyptic settings, so it's okay?

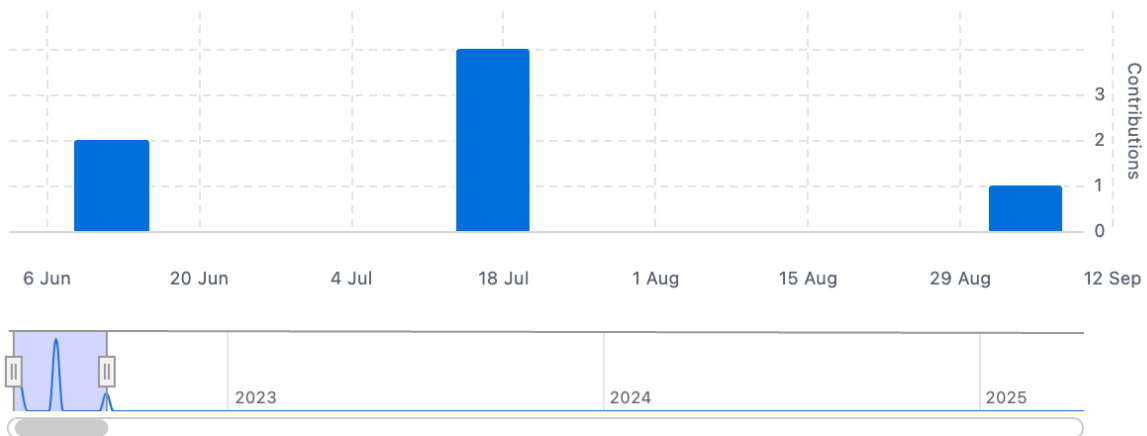[2]twitter.com/jesperjuul/status/771626951446401025

4 Commit History

Overview

Commits over time

Weekly from 6. Juni 2022 to 5. Sept. 2022

Messages

Mon, 13 Jun 2022 14:05:33
Initial commit

Mon, 13 Jun 2022 14:08:15
Created repo

Thu, 21 Jul 2022 16:24:09
Updated to new website standard

Thu, 21 Jul 2022 16:26:44
Markdown typo

Fri, 22 Jul 2022 09:27:19
Repo link fixed

Fri, 22 Jul 2022 09:31:24
Correcting process description

Fri, 09 Sep 2022 10:00:00
I somehow LOST the game.js file along the way, it's back.

5 File Structure

2022-06-13

```
It is as if you were playing chess/
   css/
   icons/
   images/
   info/
   js/
      .DS_Store
      iterator.js
      mods-eng-basic.js
      phaser-no-physics.min.js
      tracery.js
   src/
      .DS_Store
      ArrowsHelper.js
      Boot.js
      MainMenu.js
      Preloader.js
 apple-touch-icon.png
 index.html
 README.md
```

2022-09-09

```
It is as if you were playing chess/
   assets/
   css/
   icons/
   images/
   info/
   js/
   press/
```

```
    process/
    src/
        .DS_Store
        ArrowsHelper.js
        Boot.js
        MainMenu.js
        Preloader.js
        Game.js
.gitignore
_config.yml
apple-touch-icon.png
index.html
README.md
```

6 press.md

- warpdoor.com/2016/08/17/it-is-as-if-you-were-playing-chess-pippin-barr (before it was even released!)
- rockpapershotgun.com/2016/08/20/best-free-games-of-the-week-29
- oujevipo.fr/general/5508-it-is-as-if-you-were-playing-chess
- killscreen.com/game-pretending-play-chess-performance
- anaitgames.com/articulos/it-is-as-if-you-were-playing-chess
- commonuseless.com/2016/09/18/it-is-as-if-you-were-playing-chess-pippin-barr (an interview; not available anymore)
- brkeogh.com/2016/10/19/theyre-good-games-brent
- thoughtsofathirdworldfilmmaker.wordpress.com/2016/10/18/megabyte-size-look-at-it-is-as-if-you-were-playing-chess-and-bennet-foddys-speed-chess.

Imprint

The evolution of...
It is as if you were playing chess (2016)

See: Love.