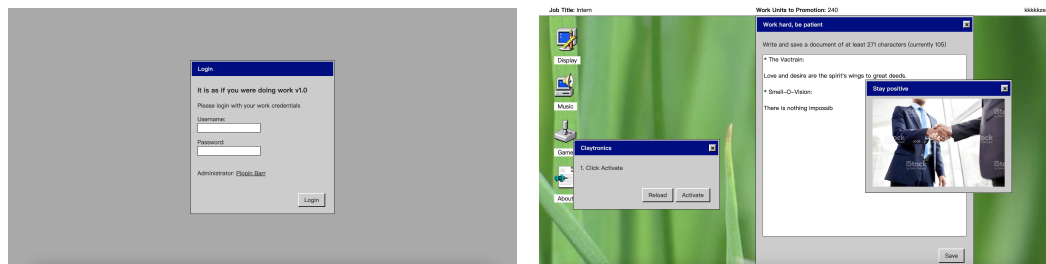


1.Introduction: My Project and the Selection of Reference

My project focuses on the digital gesture of “closing pop-ups”, exploring how this seemingly functional interface action both shapes and reflects our everyday tendencies towards avoidance and escape. By merging real-world scenarios with the visual framework of digital pop-ups, I use the visual structure and interaction logic of error messages as a medium. This approach allows audiences to reexamine the psychological and social mechanisms underlying such behaviour through an interactive experience.

I selected Pippin Barr's interactive work *It Is as If You Were Doing Work* as a reference, as his practice resonates with my research both formally and thematically. We both examine how interface language shapes human behaviour and psychology, revealing the underlying power dynamics through interactive experiences. However, our differing contexts lead us to distinct yet complementary focuses.

2.Analysing the Reference: Pippin Barr's *It Is as If You Were Doing Work*



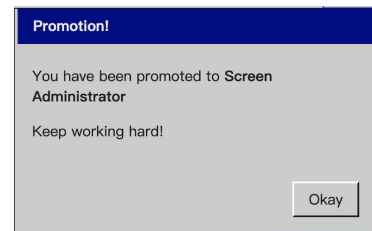
Pippin Barr's *It Is as If You Were Doing Work* provides a key reference point for understanding how digital systems influence behaviour through interface language. The work takes the form of a web-based interactive game set in a fictional future, where human labour has been entirely replaced by machines, leaving people anxious about their own uselessness and lack of purpose. It transforms the familiar 1990s Windows operating system interface into a simulation of modern office work and digital labour. The game continuously generates seemingly meaningless and repetitive tasks (such as composing emails of a specific word count, clicking confirmation buttons, waiting for progress bars to load, or ticking checkboxes), inviting audiences to regain a sense of productivity by completing simulated office routines. The system continually provides performance feedback and reward mechanisms, thereby rationalising this false “productivity”. On the surface, audiences appear to be working; in reality, they are merely passively executing a self-perpetuating set of instructions.

Through these everyday digital gestures, Barr employs simulation and satire to reveal humanity's deep-rooted obsession with “usefulness” and “productivity” in the digital age. Amid the constant clicking and waiting, audiences personally experience the system-orchestrated “sense of busyness” and “illusion of necessity”. Rather than articulating his position explicitly, Barr allows it to be perceived through interaction

itself. The work's critical force does not rely on traditional narrative or textual exposition, but on the interactive structure itself: the endless pop-up windows, feedback loops, and system instructions directly "demonstrate" the behavioural patterns of individuals managed by systems.

Formally, Barr employs web-based interactivity to immerse audiences within simulated workflows, blurring the boundaries between game and work and revealing their shared reliance on similar mechanisms: commands, repetition, and systems of reward and punishment. Visually, the game replicates the Windows 95 interface, this soft, familiar visual language initially creates a sense of intimacy, yet as the experience unfolds, its absurdity and mechanical nature gradually surface.

In tone, the work retains the impersonal detachment of system language while intermittently inserting emotionally charged, performance oriented motivational phrases (such as "Success is never accidental" or "Level up achieved!"). This exaggerated positivity, applied to meaningless tasks, amplifies the work's satirical edge and reveals system language as a tool of behavioural discipline rather than neutral communication.



In summary, *It Is as If You Were Doing Work* uses interface language as its critical medium. It employs the most familiar interface elements and digital structures to satirise futile labour while prompting the audience to question:

In our digital society, is the sense of "action" and "control" we experience merely an illusion engineered by system design?

Barr transforms the interactive structure itself into a critical language. Through the orchestration of interface grammar, he articulates his position on contemporary digital labour.

3.Comparative Analysis: Barr's Work and My Project

a.Theme & Context

Through the simulation of repetitive tasks, Barr demonstrates how the system generates a "sense of busyness" and an "illusion of necessity". He situates his practice within the context of productivity culture, where individuals are reduced to tasks, and daily operations are transformed into behaviour patterns that appear autonomous yet are in fact predetermined by the system. Experiencing this work, with each click and task completion, prompted me to ponder:

why do I so readily "obey" the system's directives?

In my view, Barr exposes the "productivity illusion" embedded in contemporary society. When systems incessantly demand our execution, response, and output, we have become conditioned to act automatically rather than to think critically. The work

therefore explores how systems employ interface language and interactive mechanisms to sustain the illusion of usefulness and achievement.

By contrast, my work focuses on the digital gesture of “closing pop-ups”, situated within the contemporary digital culture where we are constantly surrounded by various system pop-ups and habituated to repeatedly clicking the “close” button. This repetitive gesture, reinforced by instant feedback, gradually rationalise avoidance and transform it into a cultural habit. Through closing, we not only filter information but also evade others, reality, and ourselves. This led me to ask:

How do digital systems, through interface language, shape modern humanity's cultural tendency to “evade complexity”?

In my work, I aim to make audiences aware of how system design subtly influences behaviour, choices, and even emotions. As a designer, I further reflect on my own position within this process:

what role does design itself play in shaping these responses?

I reinterpret the “close” button as a socialised gesture that transforms avoidance into comfort, transforming interaction into a form of narrative that exposes design's inherent power. My work focuses not on whether users avoid, but on how avoidance is shaped by digital language as a rational choice.

In summary, both *It Is As If You Were Doing Work* and my project examine how individuals are shaped within contemporary digital society. However, their contexts and stances differ. Barr's work operates within the framework of productivity culture, exposing the submissive mindset fostered by production logic. In contrast, my work is situated within the culture of digital escapism, presenting another kind of engineered illusion: systems employ the logic of “closing” to render avoidance “rational” and “comfortable”.

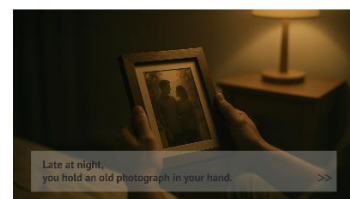
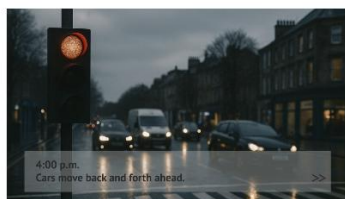
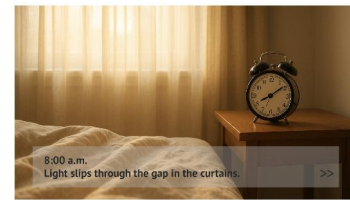
b. Medium & Interaction Experience

In Barr's *It Is as If You Were Doing Work*, interaction itself becomes the medium of critique. Through a web-based simulation, he enables audiences to experience the absurdity of “productivity” within repetitive operational loops. By constructing false feedback, Barr creates an experience that appears interactive yet lacks substance, allowing audiences to perceive the psychological mechanisms of systemic manipulation through incessant clicking. Interaction here ceases to be functional participation, instead becoming a reflective experiential structure.

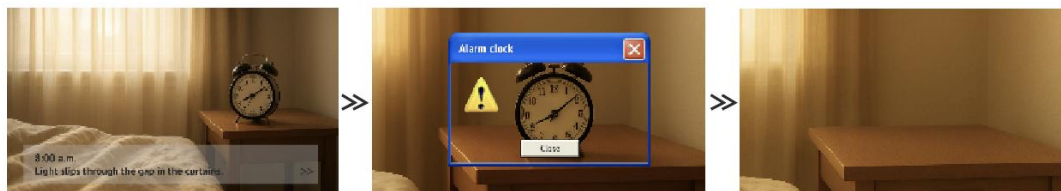
My early experiments centred on static visual collages, overlaying system pop-up frames onto real-life scenes to explore how digital systems intervene in and shape our perception of reality. Barr's approach prompted me to consider:

How might this process transcend mere “viewing” to become an experience that can be “executed”?

Consequently, I developed these visual experiments into interactive forms, allowing audiences to experience design logic through direct engagement rather than passive observation. In my interactive work *A Day of Closing*, I transformed the act of “clicking to close” into a narrative mechanism through a web-based interaction. Drawing inspiration from interactive visual novels, the work primarily relies on page transitions and click-based interactions. Audiences advance through five everyday scenes by clicking “close”: waking, working, being outdoors, socialising, and remembering (moving from private to public spaces and eventually into the realm of emotional withdrawal).



Each act of closing corresponds to a specific “object of closing”, representing things people tend to avoid in daily life (for instance, the alarm clock in the first scene when the wake-up alarm sounds). Upon each click, the “object” disappears from view, accompanied by system feedback.



However, as the narrative advances, the feedback gradually slows, lags, and eventually fails. Through this experience, I aim for audience to perceive how design and systems, through their seemingly neutral interface logic and feedback rhythms, rationalise escapism into a habitual behavioural pattern.

In summary, both Barr's work and mine employ web-based interaction as the primary presentation form, using digital actions such as clicking and closing to evoke psychological and emotional resonance in the audience. However, due to the differing contexts and themes, Barr's work is entirely constructed within a virtual system desktop that simulates digital labour, my work situates similar interaction logics within real-world contexts to reveal the overlap between digital systems and everyday escapism. Barr's work centres on fabricated interactions and positive reinforcement to shape the user experience. My approach, however, employs the act of “closing” while progressively introducing delayed or failed system responses, thereby prompting users to reflect. This has led me to reconsider interaction not as

simple participation but as a medium capable of shaping emotions and behaviour. I aim for audiences to recognise this awareness during their experience.

c. Visual & Tone

Visually, my work draws upon the structure of interactive visual novels, employing real-world scenes as narrative backgrounds. Semi-transparent text boxes overlay these scenes as narration, indicating time and actions, and immersing audiences in a first-person perspective as if they were physically present within the setting. Through this visual framework, I aimed to maintain the reading rhythm of a game, where clicking functions as the narrative trigger. To create these real-world scenes, I used AI to generate these “first-person view” images, preserving a sense of visual neutrality. Simultaneously, I believe AI-generated imagery carries a particular tension: it appears partially authentic yet retains traces of artificiality and incongruity, producing a texture suspended between reality and virtuality. This ambiguity resonates with the conceptual focus of my work.

For the pop-up window, I adopted the Windows system interface style, a choice akin to Barr's approach. Many reviewers have remarked that Barr's games evoke a sense of nostalgia. Similarly, I intended to employ this familiar system visual language to establish an initial sense of trust and immersion. However, my approach differed in that I retained only the window's frame and buttons, the most recognisable structure elements and the actionable “close” function. For me, the pop-up window is not merely a visual interface but a digital symbol imbued with command and control. By overlaying it onto real-world scenarios, I aim to prompt audiences to reflect on how system logic subtly permeates and governs everyday life.

In terms of tone, both my work and Barr's textual elements originate from the system's perspective (*the language of system feedback*). However, Barr's tone incorporates exaggeration and performance-oriented undertones to achieve satirical and critical effects. My tone, conversely, remains more neutral and detached, simulating how systems gently guide human behaviour and emotions in reality. Through this, I aim to reveal the ideology concealed beneath the surface neutrality of system language.

4. Reflection and New Enquiry

Barr's work prompted me to reexamine the interface as a medium, not merely a form for presenting design content, but as an ideologically charged narrative space. In my previous experiments, I also employed system interfaces to frame my work, yet failed to achieve true integration between the interface and the work's content and stance. By constructing a narrative backdrop and a cohesive structure, Barr transforms the interface into an extension of his position. This has led me to consider how to strengthen the expressive potential of my own work at the level of medium, enabling more direct communication with the audience.

Furthermore, analysing Barr's work has reaffirmed that a stance can be conveyed and experienced directly through interactive forms, not solely reliant on visuals or text. My previous practice focused primarily on visual experiments like collage, overlooking the inherent potential of interaction itself. This writing has also prompted me to consider:

As a designer, can I use structural design to make the audience's actions and responses become part of the work itself, allowing their participation to form the narrative?

How can audience reactions become integral to the work?

During the writing process, I also observed that within Barr's work, users gain a “false sense of satisfaction” through continuous clicking, task completion, and progression. This has led me to further examine the role of system design in shaping emotions. “Close” is not merely a functional action but an emotional regulation mechanism. This led me to pose a new question:

Is the system shaping our emotional rhythms and psychological security through its interface logic?

Building on this, both in experimentation and writing, I gradually realised that “close”, as the system's predefined exit mechanism, makes escape permissible and rationalised. This led me to question further:

When escape becomes permitted, is user agency merely an illusion?

Who designed this logic of evasion?

Is escape itself defined, permitted, or even guided by the system?

These reflections shifted my focus from the individual user's psychology to a deeper inquiry into how systems define and direct such behaviour at a deeper level.

Reference

Barr, P. (2017) *It Is as If You Were Doing Work*. [web-based interactive game]. Available at: <https://pippinbarr.com/itisasifyouweredoingwork/>.