

Parody as brand: The case of [adult swim]’s paracasual advergames

Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies 2016, Vol. 22(2) 177–198
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DOI: 10.1177/1354856514546097
con.sagepub.com



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Abstract

Advergimes – a neologism for video games designed to advertise a product or service – are marketing devices employed to impact consumers’ purchasing decisions and, more frequently, shape their impressions of a promoted brand. The online advergimes of the programming block-turned media brand [adult swim] (AS) present a clear case in which the games act as rich signifiers of brand aesthetics even if they are not directly connected to the content of the brand’s television shows, live events, and other assorted merchandise. Although these ‘casual’-style titles have game-play mechanics that are accessible to broad audiences, these advergimes often exhibit a critical stance toward other games, which differentiates them from the vast majority of casual games on the market. But rather than being *anti*-casual, we argue that these games are best understood as being *paracasual* because they use parody to both trouble prevailing definitions of casual games and advergimes, and deploy an aesthetic disposition that further helps define the brand. Furthermore, they are an increasingly visible and vital component of a constellation of texts and practices that function as what James Paul Gee calls an ‘affinity space’ for a lucrative audience demographic. This article assesses how AS games use parody to deconstruct textually video gaming’s most popular genres and how such parodic deconstruction, as evidenced by players’ online discussions, serves as an affinity space for a media-savvy taste culture.

Keywords

Adult swim, advertising, affinity space, branding, casual games, fans, games, satire, television, video parody

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Academic studies of ‘advergames’ – a neologism for video games designed to advertise a product, brand, or service – have, to date, tended to focus on how these new media marketing devices impact consumers’ purchasing decisions or shape their impressions of the promoted brand (Gurău, 2008; Steffen et al., 2013; Terlutter and Capella, 2013; Waiguny et al., 2013; Winkler and Buckner, 2006). But advergames are not just another means by which products might be hyped. Rather, by offering consumers ‘simulations of products and services’ (Bogost, 2007: 200), video games present marketers with a uniquely suited medium for creating ‘an environment for experimentation’ for a mass audience (Frasca, 2003: 225). Yet despite being an industry fixture since the 1970s (Bogost, 2007: 200), curiously few advergames take advantage of their experimental and experiential potential. Instead, the typical advergame assumes a demonstrably ‘casual’ design that hails a wide audience, including self-identifying gamers and nongamers alike, and attempts to persuade them through simple product placement or by linking gameplay mechanics to the item or service’s branded virtues (see Bogost, 2011: ch. 7). Perhaps more critically, most advergames take pains not to risk upsetting consumers by trading in either suspect game design or risqué content.

There are those advergames, however, that defy and challenge this design standard. *Pole Dance Party*, *Victorian BMX: Death on Wheels*, *Hemp Tycoon*, *Radioactive Teddy Bear Zombies*, *Candy Mountain Massacre*, *5 Minutes to Kill (Yourself)* are only a sampling of the hundred plus, free-to-play online games promoting [adult swim] (AS), a moniker owned by Turner Broadcasting that has grown from a television (TV) programming block into a transmedia brand.¹ AS’s games complicate considerably the conventional understanding of the advergame for at least two reasons: first, the games’ juvenile content hails a demographically specific audience (rather than a general one); and, second, the games sell users on a shared trans-platform media experience in lieu of in-game content or product placement. However, they are not the opposite of advergames, as they are expressly interested in selling a branded media experience. Also, these games are not the opposite of casual games. Casual games, as exemplified by mobile device games like the wildly successful *Angry Birds* franchise and pervasive social network games such as *Candy Crush Saga*, offer easily understandable and navigable gameplay for users who often do not consider themselves gamers. AS games do, by and large, fit the mold of casual from the standpoint of mechanics; however, they simultaneously complicate expectations of such games from a standpoint of content. Stepping away from the more standard nonthreatening and whimsical terrain of anthropomorphic birds and pigs or confection-based puzzles, the games of AS include darker, more potentially controversial subject matter, impishly toying with themes of mortality and exploitation, among others.

Consequently, these games are best understood as what we are calling ‘paracasual’. They use the design format associated with casual games as a platform to parody broader video game conventions, both embracing the accessibility of casual games and playfully troubling the (casual) gaming experience. Linda Hutcheon has perhaps been most successful at succinctly defining parody ‘as imitation with critical difference’ (2000: 36), but she is also careful to recognize a paradoxical ambivalence of its critical edge. This is a key to the ‘para’ quality of these games, their simultaneous embrace of and irreverence toward ostensibly casual gaming conventions, and it is what most profoundly makes these objects so suitable for the AS brand. As is the case with AS’s cable programming and brand identity generally, parody functions as a unifying thread, but one that repeatedly destabilizes the very concept of genre itself, projecting ‘adult’ themes into formal contexts like animated TV programming and casual gaming that typically serve as vessels for more family-friendly material.

Drawing on media scholarship that understands genres and fandom as complex cultural categories of intersecting texts, tastes, and practices, we will begin by briefly describing the phenomenon of AS, its viewers, and the way that the brand has become synonymous with parodic experimentations in media form. Then, following calls in game studies to conceptualize game genres according to their interactive demands (rather than their visual or narrative elements) and to move beyond promulgating either game-centric or player-centric views – formalist understandings of game texts as rule mechanics or sociological interpretations of player practices – we assess how AS's games use parody to both engage and deconstruct textually some of video gaming's most popular casual genres (i.e. rhythm, racing, and simulation) and how AS's gamers understand these design choices through their exchanges on the Web site's discussion boards. That is, the unique textuality of the network's games opens up a discursive space that hails and invites players to further reflect on and engage with one another in an online community that is defined primarily by its collective appreciation for poking fun at the narrative rules and genre conventions that dominate contemporary entertainment. Finally, we argue that contrary to their initial impression as absurdist diversions, these games serve a very rational end that conforms to the economic logics of the post-network TV era; namely, to further solidify and expand a niche taste culture into a branded, multi-media affinity space.

Parodic taste cultures and branded affinity spaces

For the uninitiated, AS began in 2001 as a late night programming block on the basic cable stalwart Cartoon Network featuring content of a graphic or verbal nature unsuitable for that network's largely preteen daytime demographic. This lineup was and is celebrated for its array of idiosyncratic shows, including some syndicated anime but also, more prominently, parody both through skewed revivals of old Hanna-Barbera fare and more original content. The more successful original series have been *Aqua Teen Hunger Force*, *The Boondocks*, and *The Venture Brothers*, all of which have enjoyed multiple seasons, DVD releases, and other merchandising. With these and other rating successes, the block expanded in frequency and duration to the point where in 2005 AS came to be 'listed as a distinct basic-cable net[work] alongside Cartoon [Network] in Nielsen ratings' (Paskin, February 16, 2005). In addition to its stateside success, other cable networks have carried AS programs across a range of countries and cable systems since at least 2005. It is in the English-speaking countries of the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada where the brand itself has been exported most completely. Of these, only Canada's import extends to its own stand-alone Web site, which includes some overlapping game content.² Regardless, the richest promotion and dissemination of the brand is evident in its place of origin.

Bookending the programming since its inception have been interstitial bumpers (or 'bumps') that often directly address the audience. The mostly text-based bumps are conversational exchanges between the AS staff and their viewership. While they are sometimes basic promotional vehicles for other AS programming, they are more frequently cheeky jokes and/or a space where information of a meta-dialogic nature is shared, disclosing ratings information, including breakdowns by viewer age brackets, and addressing viewer feedback received through e-mails and message boards. This conversational tone even serves to position the bumps parodically in relation to the more common practices of network's interstitial identifiers. Furthermore, the industry-text-fan relationship evident through these bumps is an indication of how uniquely AS operates as a cultural phenomenon (Elkins, 2013), already making the simple programming block designation a bit tenuous. As a point of comparison, while NBC's 'Must See TV' and ABC's 'TGIF' lineups were

incredibly successful throughout the 1990s, drawing in millions of viewing households, these blocks never found NBC or ABC cultivating such a dialogic and direct address with its viewers, nor did the networks choose to separate these blocks from other network programming for ratings tracking purposes. The network's bumps present yet another reason for invoking Gee's notion of the affinity space (2005) – a point we will arrive at shortly – when analyzing how this perplexing brand coheres despite its wildly eclectic, multimedia offerings.

Like most networks in the 2000s, AS has pursued a multiplatform, or 360°, content strategy (Doyle, 2010). Along with a record label, video games are a more recent addition to the multiplicity of offerings under the banner, and they are a clear indicator that the moniker operates as a brand not defined by any single media platform. As mentioned previously, the titles of the games alone make clear their irreverent character, with a game such as *Pole Dance Party* operating as a complex signifier and illustrative example of AS's successful paracasual game design formula. The 'dance party' aspect signals that there is a relationship to rhythm games whose mechanics are often built upon mimicking of choreography (e.g. *Dance Dance Revolution*, 1998); however, the 'pole' potentially skews this, as 'pole dance' clearly references a frequent feature of strip club performance. This not only signals that the game will be unconventional in its approach to the rhythm genre but also likely to indulge the male gaze in ways that those games rarely do, at least at any explicit level. Below in our closer examination of this game's sequel, the implications of the title will be drawn out further. But even with this quick preview, it is evident that this is an assuredly unorthodox tactic for selling an audience on a media experience, one that nevertheless syncs with the network's brand management strategy.

The AS audience is invited to engage with a constellation of shared sensibility, which encompasses not just the programs, bumps, and video games but also street art displays, live events, and the Web site's official message boards. This cluster of cultural activity serves to court and define an audience that we might consider a fandom. However, the diversity of the materials and activities housed under the AS banner resists attempts to easily bracket off or define what AS consumers are drawn to aesthetically. Even assessing the TV shows as offering a consistent block of programming offers little help, as there are elements of anime (e.g. *Bleach* and *Ghost in the Shell*), Saturday morning cartoon parodies (e.g. *The Venture Bros.* and *Sealab 2021*), experimental animated comedies (e.g. *Xavier: Renegade Angel* and *Superjail!*), live action TV parodies (e.g. *Children's Hospital* and *Eagleheart*), as well as other original cartoon-based satire (e.g. *The Boondocks*), and live action sketch comedy (e.g. *Tim and Eric Awesome Show, Great Job!*). AS is actually a crystalline case of a media brand that has come to address, and in turn define, an eclectic taste culture. To be clear, not all AS fans are tickled equally by each of the programs, every bump, all the games. In fact, it is safe to assume that few consume this cultural constellation in its totality, but there remain certain elements that make the block cohere.

The most consistent (though still not wholly overarching) element is the heavy presence of satire and parody or what Thompson (2009: 214) calls an 'aesthetic-with-an-attitude'. This aesthetic disposition of the programming block has ties to historical and contemporary media forms – from the satiric Renaissance novels of François Rabelais (Bakhtin, 1984) to basic cable predecessors, such as *South Park*. A major component of the ironic address of the programming is that much of it has a parodic relationship to other programming, some of which exists in the daytime schedule of Cartoon Network and Boomerang (its sister network in the United States, which operates as a straightforward trove of cartoon nostalgia). Certainly, a program like *The Venture Bros.* does this directly by basing its general premise on that of 1960s cartoon series *Jonny Quest* but altering the setup through parodic inversion (Harries, 2000: 55–61) of character traits

(e.g. giving team leader Dr. Venture overt character flaws such as drug addiction). Others reach further afield, as with *Children's Hospital's* parody of the hour-long medical drama. Still others, like *The Boondocks*, practice more of a sociopolitical critique that, through parody of the family sitcom, unmasks ideological presumptions via the interplay of its characters and narratives (Santo, 2009). Of course, even this aesthetic is not apparent in all programming, especially the anime imports, but the 'attitude' clearly extends to the other manifestations of AS's cultural output, as we explore shortly.³

Beyond aesthetic linkages, an additional element of cohesion is the social performativity of its fans. Such performativity is apparent in the contestation among fans regarding what does or does not constitute proper AS programming. Scanning the AS Web site's message boards, one finds numerous threads devoted to questioning if the quality level of programs is in a state of decline, if particular programs do or do not belong in the schedule, or even if the bumps are becoming less funny. Fan activity and participation surrounding media texts, exemplified by Jenkins's (1992) initial survey of TV fans, have been the subject of great attention in the field of media studies for some time. More recently, Jenkins (2006) himself has complicated the understanding of these activities as they manifest through networked digital media channels in more expansive and diffuse ways, while others have made the case that the kind of aforementioned message board activity is a sign of fan participation and performance (Crawford and Rutter, 2007). Although AS fans may have eclectic and perhaps more tenuous bonds than other groups, it does not mean that their activities should be understood as any less legitimate. The online exchanges make it clear that the brand is a component or extension of identity for fans.

While one could make the observation that AS viewers are not bound by consumption of and/or participation in a particular narrative universe like that of *Star Trek*, the various texts and performances of AS nevertheless function in the way that Cornel Sandvoss (2007: 23) describes fan objects:

Fan objects . . . form a *field of gravity*, which may or may not have an *urtext* in its epicenter, but which in any case corresponds with the fundamental meaning structure through which all these texts are read. The fan text is thus constituted through a multiplicity of textual elements; it is by definition intertextual and formed between and across texts as defined at the point of production. (emphasis in original)

In fact, the devotion apparent among the Web site's message board users is of the order that Hills (2002), among others, has described as a 'media cult'. While there are certainly fans of specific elements of the AS universe, there are a great number who, as evidenced through the message boards and the dialogic referentiality of the bumps, are invested in the universe. Still, to conceive of them as a media cult neither quite fits Hills's definition nor of most fan studies' scholars. While the televised programs can be described as dabbling in genres of most predominant in cult forms, which for Hills include 'science fiction, horror, fantasy, comedy and camp', even these individual programs recombine and muddy such generic distinctions. Certainly, taken as a whole, AS cannot be defined as being of any singular or unified generic classification. It is thus helpful to step around the generic bind a bit, at least in describing the contours of the contents, and focus instead on how the brand functions as a cohesive force when established genres and aesthetic groupings fail to cohere.

AS experiments frequently with its programming choices, nightly lineups, and marketing campaigns. Yet it would be a mistake to see its *mélange* of popular multimedia offerings or its enviable TV ratings as happy accidents (Variety Staff, 2006). Indeed, the complexity of its brand management is another reason why the AS phenomenon provides us with a valuable case study for

examining what post-network TV looks like after the age of TV (to borrow the title of Spigel and Olsson's (2004) influential anthology). With the brand's genesis as a programming block during the latter years of what Lotz (2007) calls the 'multichannel transition era', and its rapid maturation and popularization as its own transmedia brand during TV's 'post-network era', AS has been quick to develop a wide range of parodic but (mostly) tonally consistent media products. Its advergames, as we have been arguing, are but one arrow in AS's branding quiver. Yet the games are of particular value to the network because they entice consumers into interfacing with the brand in a way that is qualitatively different from the network's other cultural texts.

These interactive experiences underscore that AS is more than a televisual brand; it is a 'platform for action' (Arvidsson, 2005: 244). With it, consumers use the games to craft their own identities and forge a connection with others. Arvidsson (2005) identifies the sociality of brands, explaining that contemporary brands are less tied to selling a specific good or service than they are about creating a 'mediatic space' within which 'consumers are free to produce the shared meanings and social relations that the branded good will help create in *their* life' (p. 245, emphasis in original). He later describes the mediatic space of the brand as constituting 'a common' (p. 247). A few key words – mediatic space, social relations, shared meanings, a common – are worth highlighting here. AS succeeds as a multimedia brand in the post-network era precisely because it develops loyal viewers who follow its offerings across time and space (i.e. events and platforms) and who feel emboldened to play together and correspond with one another in AS's branded space.

A compelling and methodologically fruitful concept to invoke at this juncture is 'affinity space'. Proposed by Gee (2005) as a way of circumventing some of the nagging conceptual problems bound up with the term 'community of practice' – most notably what exactly constitutes membership in a given community – an affinity space focuses on 'the idea of a *space* in which people interact, rather than on *membership* in a community' (emphasis in original, 2005: 214). The primary benefit to this alternative framing is that it 'allows us to ask about what thoughts, values, actions and interactions go on in this space, by whom and with whom, without assuming any one group membership or, for that matter any membership at all' (p. 223). Considering Gee's affinity space alongside Arvidsson's comments on the sociality of brands suggests that there is potential for a multimedia platform and brand like AS to function as a discursive engine that prompts user feedback and creative acts *and* serve as a discursive space where these thoughts and gestures can be shared and archived – effectively tying together all those parodic and genre-defying texts, products, and events that define the AS experience.

The second benefit of adopting Gee's affinity space is for its analytical utility. Gee identifies the affinity space as one type of 'semiotic social space', which is any space where people ascribe meanings to symbols and signs. Semiotic social spaces – which can include physical and virtual locales like a doctor's office, a classroom, an online chat room, or a video game – possess their own internal and external grammars. The internal grammar of a video game is its design; how producers and designers have organized their thoughts about how a title should function. The external grammar of a video game, on the other hand, is the extratextual discourse that surrounds it, including critical reviews, fiery debates on Web sites, and user-created modifications; in effect, how audiences act and organize their ideas around a given game.⁴ These grammars are dialectical generators of meaning. For instance, the meanings that AS gamers make of their paracasual gameplay (internal grammar) are expressed on message boards (external grammar). Such narrativizing of gameplay acts as a site of community bonding and identity construction and maintenance (Albrechtslund, 2010). These conversations also function as immaterial labor, which can, in turn, affect how producers approach their updates and subsequent projects (Martens, 2011). This means

that external grammar and internal grammar shape one another over time within such an affinity space.

These grammars are also useful for providing a framework for assessing how AS's advergaming function paracasually by analyzing the internal design grammar of popular genre-bending games in tandem with the external grammar of feedback posted to discussion boards. Treating AS and its games as branded affinity spaces with their mutually constitutive external and internal grammars instead of shoehorning the unwieldy assemblages of fan groups, texts, and practices into some rigid generic category better accounts for the dialectical tensions and transgeneric hybridity contained within the various cultural objects of AS – which is perhaps nowhere more necessary than when assessing how the Web site's advergaming transform casual into paracasual gameplay.

Casual, hardcore, and paracasual gaming

TV and film scholars are not the only media critics who have troubled prevailing generic classifications. Game scholars have likewise weighed in on the difficulties of sorting their texts into rigid groupings. Apperley (2006) argues that game genres are too often tied to the existing moving-image media (notably film and TV), and these co-opted headings do not account properly for the medium's uniquely interactive structures, many of which are shared across ostensibly different genres. Building on the work of Wolf (2001), Apperley contends that critics should instead investigate games' structures of interactivity, rather than overemphasize narrative or representational elements, to arrive at meaningful and consistent classifications that do not simply reproduce the industry's convenient commercial labels. In making his case, Apperley cites Newman (2004) and Consalvo's (2003) work to underscore the fact that games, like all media, are always understood contextually. Players bring their accumulated histories of media experiences to bear on their understandings of gaming conventions and gameplay demands. Video games likewise often possess self-reflexive textual elements (e.g. characters who break the diegetic fourth wall, interface conventions and commands that hail the player ['Insert more coins to continue.']), signaling that designers are keenly aware of users' knowledge of media's diverse and overlapping histories of form and content. As we document shortly, the AS games celebrate this intertextual knowledge in their gameplay structures, as does the online environment in which these paracasual games are embedded. Focusing exclusively on a game's textual machinations, especially when it is mishandled as a static object of inquiry (Newman, 2012), is not only ill advised for critical undertakings, such a move disagrees fundamentally with users' basic media experiences.

Malaby (2007) continues this line of argumentation, offering perhaps the least formalist definition of games (and by extension genres), positing that we should make sense of these texts and their attendant activities vis-à-vis their ability to engender certain emergent play procedures and processes of meaning making. A game is, according to Malaby (2007: 96), 'a semibounded and socially legitimate domain of contrived contingency that generates interpretable outcomes.' Game rules do not figure into his definition because rules rarely tell us how games are or might become implicated in players' every day, media-consuming lives. Malaby (2007: 103) states:

... games are grounded in (and constituted by) human practice and are therefore always in the process of becoming. This also means that they are not reducible to their rules. This is because any given singular moment in any given game may generate new practices or new meanings, which may in turn transform the way the game is played, either formally or practically (through a change in rules or conventions). This recursive quality is what I mean by "process" here, and it means that any attempt to

formalize games by defining them essentially in terms of their rules or through a taxonomy of types (Zimmerman and Salen, 2003) falls short because it fails to capture how games are moving targets, capable of generating new, emergent effects that then inform the following instances of the game.

Although we agree generally with Malaby's point that to overemphasize a game's rule structure is to miss gaming's multifarious contextual uses and meanings, we should also be wary not to overcorrect and ignore what rules – especially as they are articulated through game design choices – can tell us about a game's imagined community of players. Indeed, in one of the first scholarly examinations of casual gaming practices, Kuittinen et al. (2007) argue for understanding casual gameplay within an expanded game experience model to better account for all those experiences that might otherwise be lost or ignored if we reproduce the casual–hardcore binary that dominates gaming industry discourse. Game players and the mechanics of play are inextricably linked concepts – a point made clear in Jesper Juul's *A Casual Revolution* (2010).

In the first book-length analysis of the casual game phenomenon, Juul presents a five-point schema that outlines the primary considerations for casual game design. The utility of his schema is that it makes clear the connection between a game's demands and players' lived needs; in other words, casual games can be more easily fit into times and spaces left when players have already attended to their everyday life (i.e. nongame) responsibilities. Most games are not exclusively casual or 'hardcore' but possess elements of each; that is, games possess design choices that reflect a continuum of possible gaming commitments. The typical casual game (1) possesses a pleasant gaming environment (what Juul calls a 'positive fiction' that appeals to a broad constituency); (2) presupposes that its players have relatively little knowledge of gaming mechanics or conventions (what Juul terms 'usability'); (3) allows gaming in short bursts of time (i.e. 'interruptibility'); (4) does not punitively punish gameplay failures; and (5) promotes a sense of 'juiciness' or mixes spectacular events with 'excessive positive feedback' (paraphrased from Juul, 2010: 50).

Like any media text, the casual game makes a series of assumptions about its would-be users. Designers' beliefs about gamers and, reciprocally, the public's thoughts about designers and their craft are the source of much debate. Juul notes (2010: 75–76):

A common complaint against the traditional video game industry is that developers are making games only "for themselves," with the casual game industry . . . proclaiming to make games for "everybody." A casual game developer describes his own position like this: "Hardcore developers make games for themselves ('I like that – let's put it in'), whereas casual developers make games for themselves and everybody else ('I like that, but let's make sure it works for my dad/sister/receptionist too.')

Yet this is the point where the AS advergaming muddies the definitional waters. On the one hand, these titles embrace accessible game mechanics and rules that make them – formally speaking – casual: they are rhythm games; they are side-scrolling platformers; they are two-dimensional shooters and turn-based simulators. In a way, we have seen these games before. Yet their fictional content – which is unconventional by almost any standard – and their distinctly niche manner of address give them a paracasual orientation.

Game design is a textual instantiation of its imagined players. The AS games' parodic content and its sometimes chummy, sometimes biting, but always personal rapport (echoing the programming block's TV bumps), signal that the brand's producers are hailing a decidedly mixed group of players; namely, one that includes hardcore *and* ex-hardcore gamers. Again, Juul provides insight into this aspect of casual gaming. He observes, 'A common complaint is that a life with children, jobs, and general adult responsibilities is not conducive to playing video games for

long periods of time' (2010: 51). Like the adult who no longer has time for Saturday-morning cartoons, the ex-hardcore gamer must work to fit video games into her/his busy schedule. AS's games use the casual game form to deliver targeted content that resonates for hardcore, or more likely still, ex-hardcore players. In his research, Juul (2010: 52) found that ex-hardcore gamers typically have a preference for 'negative fiction' (competitive, violent, and dark worlds); a high degree of game knowledge; little time to invest in games, generally; and a preference for easier titles. As our closer readings of AS games will make clear, much of the parodying that goes on is through a tonal shift in game content that introduces depravity and satire into otherwise innocuous gameplay mechanics.

There are numerous Web sites that contain free casual games that appeal to a mix of mature hardcore, ex-hardcore, and casual players (e.g. addictinggames.com and armourgames.com). Moreover, some of the games on these sites poke fun at casual game mechanics and contain snarky intertextual references that assume a media-savvy public. However, the AS games stand apart and deserve the paracasual label because they are not *just* parodic video games, they are parodic *advergames*. Parody in the AS games serves, in part, to insulate that branded experience from the negative affective dimensions of advertising and to entice gamers into connecting, if ironically, with the televisual and online affinity spaces that are being marketed to them.

AS's paracasual advergames

At the time of this essay's writing, the AS games page hosted over 100 'original' casual games (games.adultswim.com). 'Original games', in this case, are those titles that are 'presented by AS' and that have been designed for the site (though not necessarily by AS's production house Williams Street). The game selection page (seen in Figure 1) features a menu of the site's 'new/recommended' and most popular titles, including flash-based games playable through the site and social games designed for integration into Facebook. This does not deviate significantly with respect to the presentation from other casual gaming sites; popular sites like Miniclip.com and Gamenode.com use a similar menu of choices. Each game on this page lists how many times it has been played and its aggregate community rating (as determined by players on a 10-point scale), and each game has been slotted into one or more of the site's decidedly broad categories such as 'new, action, adventure, puzzle, and shooter'.

Once a game is selected, the primary window launches in the middle of the page and is preceded by one of a number of rotating linear advertisements that typically last 3–30 seconds. The window is complemented by a small menu of links encouraging players to share their gameplay experiences: users can rate the game; leave remarks in the game's comments section; see where they stack up on the 'high score' page's leaderboards; and communicate their status using social networking sites and utilities including Facebook, reddit, Twitter, and e-mail (as seen in Figure 2). This, too, is a typical feature on casual gaming sites, an unsurprising design tactic for free gaming operations hoping to increase their site traffic and ad revenue through electronic word of mouth. The main page also lists those AS games available as paid iOS and/or Android applications, taking commercial advantage of casual gaming's popularity on tablets and mobile devices (Williams, 2011). The site's visual design, its utilization of social networking tools, and its in-house promotion of its pay-to-play apps do not set the AS's games apart from similar online game destinations. What makes these games unique – what makes them paracasual – is attributable to what we do not see, to that which is not advertised, and to the unrelenting parodic manner in which these games have been crafted and presented for consumption.

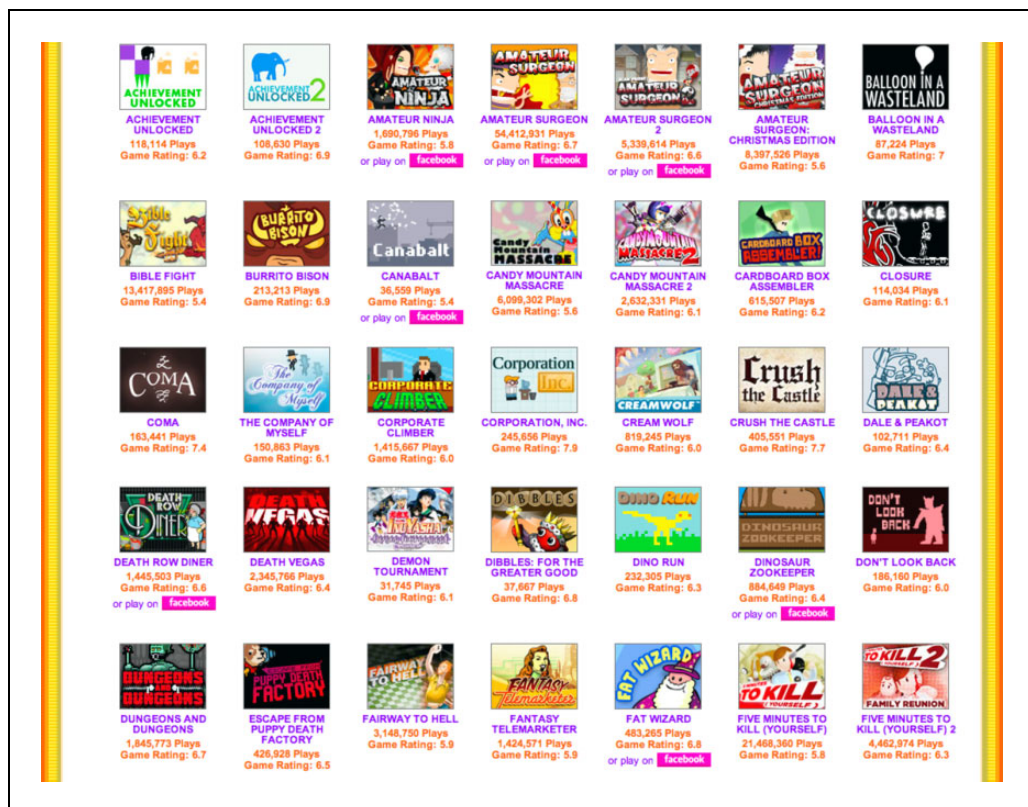


Figure 1. A portion the game selection page for [adult swim]'s 'original games'.

Unlike the vast majority of advergames on the Internet, AS titles contain conspicuously little product placement. In fact, only a few games are obvious vehicles for the programming block's intellectual property – games where the player controls characters-turned-avatars or where gameplay activities loosely connect to a show's narrative concerns or themes. These tie-ins also do not figure prominently on the AS Web site proper. For example, *Aqua Teen Hunger Force: Worst Game Ever* (now simply titled *Worst Game Ever*) is buried in the long list of games at the bottom of the page, while games like *The Venture Bros: Flight of The Monarch* and *Squidbillies: Floor It* do not appear on the site at all.⁵ The appearance of these comparatively traditional advergames on other game aggregators signals that the product placement strategy is fine for raising awareness about the nightly shows and driving gamers to the Web site – the games' opening titles all feature the AS URL – but that this technique is insufficient for keeping players at the site or for its brand management.

By featuring game content unconnected to the nightly shows' characters and narratives, AS invites its fans to enjoy online games for their own sake. Such a strategy tacitly posits that these games are to be taken seriously (so to speak) and ought to be evaluated on their own terms; these are not advergames *qua* ads but advergames *qua* games. Jeff Olsen, the vice president of Adult Swim Digital and Games, contends that the 'audience for a casual game based on completely original IP, in my experience, is almost unlimited'. Olsen continues, 'If you're basing [the game] on a show, you're probably shutting more people out than letting them in' (Sliwinski, 2010). As a

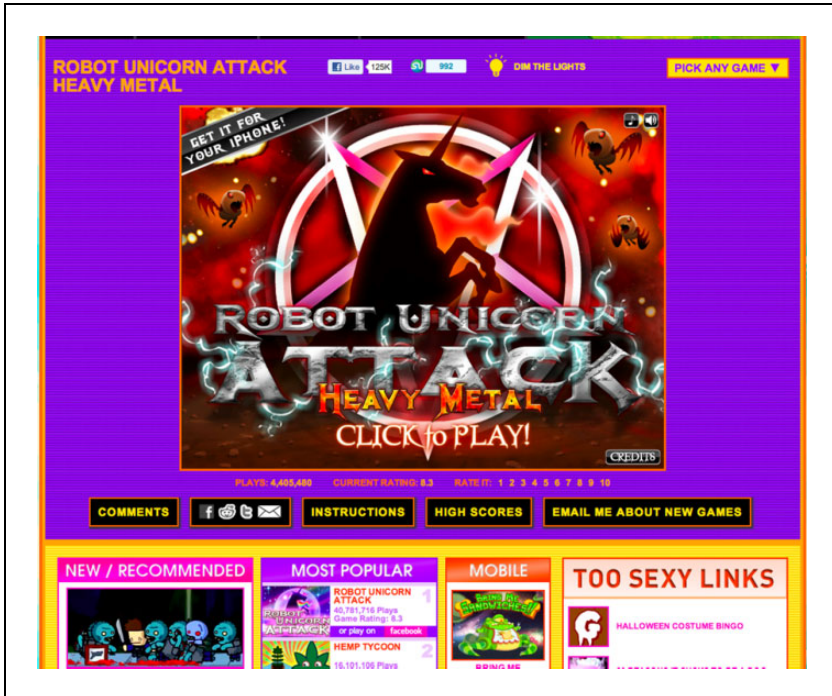


Figure 2. *Robot Unicorn Attack's* title screen and its connectivity prompts.

result, these titles do not suffer the potentially negative stigma of other advergames because they do not reek of crass commercialism (i.e. aside from the obligatory linear ads, they are not selling a product as much as offering a branded experience). What *is* advertised instead is a vibrant transmedia group of viewer-players who enjoy numerous entry and exit points for participating in AS's rich intertextuality of form and content.

We will now examine in closer detail three 'Adult Swim Original Games' that parodically reconfigure three popular gaming genres – rhythm (*Pole Dance Party 2*), racing (*Victorian BMX*), and simulation (*Hemp Tycoon*) – to demonstrate that the games' paracausal style is an essential ingredient for the brand's transmedia affinity spaces.⁶ None of these are the most popular by the site's metrics of 'most played' or 'top rated'. Rather, these games represent a range of engagement, with *Pole Dance Party 2* on the lower end, registering just over 1 million plays as of July 2013 and *Hemp Tycoon* approaching 20 million on the upper end. Our goal is to demonstrate how the games, in general, function as branded affinity spaces through their mutually constitutive internal grammars of game design and their external grammars of discussion board discourse. Working together, these grammars produce media experiences that while unequivocally branded force a reconsideration of play commitments engendered in casual games in general and advergames in particular.

Rhythm

Like its predecessor, *Pole Dance Party 2* places the gamer in the role of a pole-dancing stripper. The game's opening title card sardonically exclaims, 'Make that money but above all make your

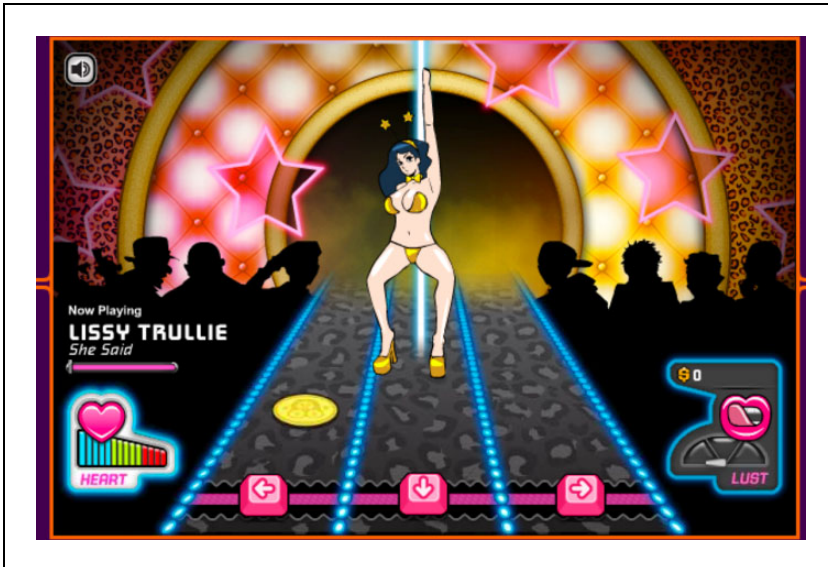


Figure 3. The player hits the keys to dance and collect money in *Pole Dance Party 2*.

parents proud! Pole dance... for glory'. As the dance party portion of the title suggests, *Pole Dance Party 2*'s game mechanics parrot the genre of rhythm games (e.g. *Dance*, *Dance Revolution*, *Lips*, 2008; *Rock Band*, 2007) where players are charged with dancing, singing, or striking buttons in sync with the corresponding, on-screen cues. Yet by transposing these mechanics into a realm of erotic entertainment incompatible with most rhythm games' typically family-friendly milieu, AS situates it as a parody of such games – an inversion of subject matter similar to the aforementioned adult-themed flaws given to the characters of *The Venture Bros*. Still it uses familiar rhythm game mechanics; i.e., a failure to keep in rhythm results in a muffled sound track and a loss of points. Commit too many errors and the round ends. In the case of the *Pole Dance Party* games, too many errors result in a depleted health meter and a flailing dancer who crashes to the floor, ending the round. Conversely, keeping in time rewards the player with additional points and builds the 'lust meter' which, when activated, adds bonus points to the player's score.

The player's identification with the selected dancer – Baby, Candy, or Bambi – is likely minimal at best because the player is not in direct control of her. Instead, the dancer's moves are prescribed events that reflect the player's ability to keep in time with the three streams of vertically cascading icons. Apropos of the strip club setting, the colorful descending markers popularized in the *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band* franchises have been replaced with stacks of dollars and coins (as seen in Figure 3).

Like *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band*, the player's progression from one round to the next unlocks a series of music tracks. Unlike those console-based rhythm games, *Pole Dance Party 2*'s presence on the Web allows for the inclusion of links for those tracks to be purchased from iTunes. *Pole Dance Party 2* is thus an advergame for the programming block and the title's featured musicians.

It is worth noting that while *Pole Dance Party 2* is clearly designed for AS's overwhelmingly straight, male audience (the game description on the producer's Web site states, 'Strut your stuff on the pole – and you don't need a plastic guitar to perform something this beautiful' (This Is Pop,

n.d.), the dancers' sexist depiction nevertheless shows notable restraint. There is no full nudity. As a point of comparison, the *Pole Dance Party* games are not anywhere near as explicit and risqué as the 'adult-themed' casual games found on countertop touch screen units in bars which appear more earnest in their intent to titillate. Instead, the title's gameplay mechanics are fairly faithful reiterations of the mechanics of more family-friendly rhythm games, using the inappropriateness of its content to create a parodic travesty. The potentially comic incongruity arises from the thought of such salacious content being grafted onto such mechanics without necessarily having to push that salaciousness to a level of more graphic depiction. Furthermore, this allows for a doubled parody in which a user familiar with popular bar top games that do trade in explicit depictions of women would likely see the *Pole Dance Party* games not only as relatively mild in comparison but also as being tied to mechanics incongruous with the typical bar top experience. This sort of genre bending aligns with the parodic experimentation that partly defines the AS brand, making the game's internal grammar consistent with the network's other games, TV programming, and various other cultural objects.

Reactions by players on the AS Web site's official board for the game's release (each new release is accompanied by an inaugural board announcing it and for players to use in registering their reactions to the game) attest to paracasual playing in several ways. For one, many players clearly understand and comment upon the textual assemblages within which *Pole Dance Party* fits, including rhythm and adult-themed bar top games. User gurlmojo (2010) brings these together pithily in the comment, 'cool game, better than guitar hero, but I think I got carpal tunnel now'.⁷ This comment functions as a confirmation that gurlmojo 'gets' the parodic transtextuality at play, both referencing one of the most popular rhythm game titles and jokingly underscoring the inappropriate character of the content. Here we see how through a rather pithy statement, a user signals, through her/his display of external grammar, an aesthetic kinship with the affinity space of the AS brand.

Another recurring element of paracasual discussion is the compulsive 'completionist' approach to gameplay. That is, despite the absurdity of the parodic transposition, users find the game designs compelling enough to facilitate serious gameplay investments. Users often compare scores both by level and by game as a whole, especially when new games are first released. There is, in fact, the 'AS high score thread of extreme braggadocio', which features the high scores on the site's five most popular games, postings that are also disseminated as on-air bumps. But perhaps the most telling, and frequent, paracasual type of post has to do with game mechanics. Especially in the first few days of a game like *Pole Dance Party 2*'s rollout, there are posts suggesting where gameplay could be improved and/or where the game design seems flawed. In some cases, these also serve as spaces for posters to establish their gaming bona fides:

Well it's entertaining for what it is. I am not a fan of this beyond that though. I'm a second tier [*In the Groove* (a dance rhythm game)] tournament player. Placed in quite a few tournaments nationwide. The timing in a lot of the songs is WAAAAAY off on PDP2. I thought maybe it was lag at first so I checked my internet. Nope. Got good connection. Video lag maybe? I AM playing on an HDTV. Nope, I played some *Stepmania*, and the notes are perfectly synced. The only thing I can think of is that the timing is just off on the game. It's not perfect, but it's kinda fun for a few minutes. (JohnLuxom, December 9, 2010)

This last comment highlights the deep interconnectedness of gameplay experience, design mechanics, and gamer identities that challenge attempts to divide discretely these categories for analysis. These postings also speak to the performative external grammar that takes place through

the AS boards. Although this is an ostensibly titillating game, the objectification of females is not replicated too greatly on the discussion boards, aside from muted, offhanded, and seemingly comic gestures that allude to the imagery distracting from the ability to focus on gameplay or leading to sexual gratification.

Racing

At its core, *Victorian BMX* is a physics racing game that challenges the player to rack up as high a score as possible en route to the finish line. The humor of the game derives largely from the ridiculous contraposition of the side-scrolling racing genre with its ‘Victorian’ style, signified by fonts, a black-and-white graphics scheme, and its inclusion of penny-farthings as its cycles of choice. However, the gamer is not just another penny-farthing cyclist competing against similar highwheelers, instead she/he plays as the Grim Reaper on a much swifter and more agile BMX bike – a vehicle associated with the late 20th century, not the 19th century. This anachronistic mash-up of eras is clearly a generative point of parody, but in addition, there is a level of morbidity rarely evident in the racing game. According to the game’s colorful description, ‘Back in the Victorian era, the biggest scourge on society wasn’t Cholera. It wasn’t Jack The Ripper. It wasn’t even cheeky, pickpocketing street urchins. No. It was Death riding his BMX around like a bleedin’ lunatic!’ (This Is Pop, n.d.). Death-the-player scores points for collecting skulls, ‘harvesting souls’ (striking down people and birds) and for completing ‘sick tricks’ without crashing. The loading screen offers this comical ‘prayer’ before the gamer rides, ‘Oh dark mother of death, give me the strength to pull off sick air while striking down these unseemly bastards. Let my ride gather speed and go exponential in the name of unholy boredom’.

The game’s absurdist setup mitigates against the title’s considerable gameplay challenges. It is an unforgiving casual game to be sure. Wrecking once, even slightly, restarts the level. *Victorian BMX* appeals to ex-hardcore players by harkening back to the difficult side-scrolling video games of the 1980s and 1990s, where there was often little room for error like *Defender* (1980) and *Battletoads* (1991). As if to reward the player, the completion of each level is perversely punctuated with an understated guillotine beheading. As is the case with *Pole Dance Party 2*, additional levels are unlocked by scoring sufficient points. *Victorian BMX* also keeps a tally concerning the number of collectibles that the gamer has acquired during their run, thus appealing to ‘completionist’ players. Despite its difficulty – it is easily the most challenging of the titles examined herein – these two game mechanics encourage repeated play. Moreover, matching the toughness of early arcade-era side-scrolling gameplay with the anachronistic inclusion of Victorian era elements imbues the internal grammar of *Victorian BMX* with the parodic posture of the AS brand. This sets the game apart from the simple adherence to genre concerns that typically defines casual, as opposed to para-casual, games.

On the title’s new release board, there are, of course, posts about game glitches or incompatibilities (e.g. the game’s initially inconsistent responsiveness when played through the Internet Explorer or Firefox Web browsers), but there are also those that describe it simply as hard, usually with little elaboration. Posters tend to get more verbose when trumpeting successes and/or when casting the game as too easy:

I’m actually doing pretty well on this game, which make me think some thing is wrong wit it I’m ranked 18 right now, but after it updated I should be at least 10 I’m going to play

more to up my score, but seriously this game is too easy for my scores not to be getting blown out of the water. (Buddyroe360, August 7, 2010)

This boardwide de-emphasis of gamer frustration – at least as it relates to one’s own shortcomings as a gamer and not a design flaw – likely has much to do with the modes of impression management inherent in the performance of fan activity within the AS community. Thinking about the profile of the paracasual gamer, it is unlikely that one would out herself/himself as unable to deal with an unforgiving scrolling game, especially one that is offered in a form closer to that of casual gaming.

That there is some mixing in of non-hardcore gamers among the AS gaming fans is evidenced by less frequent posts that do indeed express frustration with gaming abilities. However, more often than naught the performed paracasual devotion to gaming is also apparent in the communal denial of sharing hints and the accusations of cheating when scores appear to get too high. Here is a typical message board exchange:

acidpolice wrote:

How are you guys getting such huge scores? i haven’t submitted mine but i thought i was pretty good.

but you guys have 10 times as many points as me! any tips?

(i dont care about getting on bumps or anything, i just really like this game and am wondering)

[noobull’s response:]

All you have to do is sorry, but I’m not going to tell, and I’m not giving any hints. (There are probably other prying eyes.) What you need to do to get such scores is something that you will have to search for and maybe find on your own. There isn’t anything wrong with a score in the 3–4 million range, it’s top 50, so go ahead and post it. (noobull, August 8, 2010)

In other cases, when high scores get ‘too high’, charges of cheating such as ‘lol, another cheat score on top with 800,000,000+’ (NoThiNGFaC3, 2010) show an investment in these games and the status of appearing on their associated scoreboards.

Such activity regarding *Victorian BMX* on the boards is indicative of the high standards that are common to this paracasual game venue. According to the prevailing discussion board norms, the expression of frustration should only be voiced when it articulates gaming mastery, as when Sid6point7 (August 5, 2010) uses the launch of *Victorian BMX* to announce AS games’ conceptual bankruptcy:

I guess the guys at Adult Swim Games are running out of ideas. They find an interesting game, change one or two things, then sell it as their own. Not only is Cyclomaniacs better but U can actually play against other people & you get to chose from several bikes each having their own strength & weaknesses. And to the guys of Adult Swim Games . . . stay out of Kongregate! The guys there create flash games as a hobby & don’t intend to make bank on their creations; so go back to the drawing board & do what you’re paid to do.

Again, this comment and similar ones illustrate the ways in which AS gamers possess the practical knowledge necessary to situate the parody of the games in the broader field of gaming. The external grammar of these board exchanges repeatedly reveals not only the conspicuous wielding of knowledge regarding conventions and design tropes but also the desire to share information and opinions within the affinity spaces created by and for the games, subspaces nested in the wider AS brand.

Simulation

An overt parody of the casual and social game phenomenon *Farmville* (2009), *Hemp Tycoon* has itself achieved a considerable level of success. To date, it is the highest rated title on the AS site and has been played nearly 20 million times. This puzzle game challenges the player – in the role of ‘Hempy’, a cartoony hemp leaf – to succeed as an industrial hemp farmer. Hempy’s growing operation begins modestly enough with a few cheap seeds and a single pot in his attic. By selling the harvested hemp for more than the original investment, the player buys more expensive seeds and expands the anthropomorphic leaf’s growing operation into the backyard, then a cornfield, and finally an island.

Hemp Tycoon’s planting-harvesting mechanic is an ingenious way of encouraging players to return to the game and the site. Not only do the seeds have different grow times but the mature hemp plants must be harvested within a specific time frame lest they wither and die. For example, the US\$50 ‘Tri-Verde’ plant takes 5 min to grow and withers in 30 min, whereas the US\$650 ‘Rare Berry’ grows in 2 h and must be harvested in 3 h. If the player does not wish to lose their investment, they must remember to return to the game and harvest their plants. Aspiring hemp tycoons have a choice of seeds they can plant, allowing them to pursue a variety of growing strategies to fit their day. Using the above examples, if a player has a few minutes to kill before going to bed, she could plant a few Tri-Verde seeds for quick money. Planting the Rare Berry seeds, however, would result in withered crops the next morning. The producers also smartly introduce new seeds and daily sales to add modest variation to the game’s repetitive activities.

The game clearly satirizes the cultural taboos of hemp’s association with marijuana through its parodic maneuver. Like *Pole Dance Party 2*, it brings potentially objectionable content into a shell of game mechanics that is more commonly a safe zone of family-friendly material. This is evident in the depiction of Hempy’s attic space (see Figure 4), which reads like an undergrad dorm room – complete with a spinning disco ball-turned growing lamp, a smattering of black light and tie-dye hemp posters, and selectable synth reggae music tracks (as seen in Figure 4). Additionally, the descriptive information about the various seeds detail hemp’s numerous commercial applications. There is *no* overt suggestion of its mood-altering capabilities, however. Like the attic’s posters, the accessories playfully gesture at an illicit drug culture. Under the ‘Stuff’ menu, the gamer can purchase items like a peace sign, pizza, or incense, all of which aid in-game growing and harvesting.

For a variety of reasons – the more relaxed pace of gameplay, its appeal to the more truly casual gamers in the AS fold, and/or even the mellowing properties of marijuana use that the game purposefully elides – board discussion of *Hemp Tycoon* evidences a less contentious climate. While sharing of high scores is still important, the sharing of strategy and tips for maximizing scores happens frequently, as this comment board exchange reveals:

Nikitty6453 wrote:

SO if that’s how it’d gonna be. lemme ask another question:

I know that strategy is key when placing items. Haven’t had a chance to experiment yet but which tiles surrounding the ITEM square are affected? Is it the ones sharing walls of do the diagonal ones count too? (hope that makes sense)

[noobull’s response:]

Yep. Diagonal ones will be affected. A gnome can affect the eight surrounding plots of land (if you can grow on them).

In the yard, I’d suggest placing two gnomes along one of the diagonals of the original 2×2 square.

If you’re still having trouble placing the items, yeah, try starting over, I suppose. (noobull, October 10, 2010)



Figure 4. ‘Hempy’ expands his attic growing operation in *Hemp Tycoon*.

With gameplay success hinging on duration and patience rather than hand–eye coordination and dexterity, *Hemp Tycoon* appears through its external grammar to function as a more cooperative affinity space for its players, one that verges on something closer to a community. Its status as one of the most played games on the AS Web site attests to its popularity for the brand’s followers.⁸

More recently, the communal aspect of play has been made manifest with *Hemp Tycoon*’s expansion into a social game with Facebook interconnectivity. This, of course, brings this paracausal title into closer proximity with the social game *Farmville*, the parodic target to which it bears the closest resemblance. The Facebook interconnectedness also allows for more robust cooperative play, with gamers able to not just offer tips but to also exchange seed strains and totems. Furthermore, in order to facilitate such cooperative play, one is encouraged to recruit her/his Facebook friends into play, reinforcing, if not establishing, their affinity with the AS brand. However, *Hemp Tycoon* is not the only AS advergamelike to have crossed platforms in this way, with more competitive titles like *Robot Unicorn Attack* and *Amateur Surgeon*, boasting large numbers of users who ostensibly see it as an opportunity to maintain competition in real time without the need of supplementing play with visits to the discussion boards. Alongside the development of stand-alone gaming apps, this increasing social media presence shows that advergamelike have come to function as more than simple promotional vehicles for AS and that the games’ paracausal gameplay force a reconsideration of the casual game form and its gameplay.

Playing against the grain?

The games we have examined are, in a certain sense, freely available to users as affinity spaces in which they can find validation for an irreverent, knowing, relationship to media consumption. For

the ex-hardcore gamer, they may be spaces for performing or representing an aspect of identity that has been edged out by the responsibilities of work and home. For the hardcore gamer, they are perhaps spaces in which the upending of casual game tropes makes these activities something more palatable to fit into the interstices of a workday. For those who do not identify as gamers or who otherwise unabashedly play casual games, the paracasual qualities may provide a space in which to find innovation in, if not deconstruction of, a tired genre through parodic reconfiguration, especially inversion. This parallels the way that AS's TV offerings create new objects from old forms with its irreverent inclusion of what would typically be seen as inappropriate content in those forms.

However, these spaces are not entirely 'free' with their linear ads, the expanding focus on paid apps for mobile play, and their clear commercial purpose in maintaining fan affinities on behalf of the AS brand. Advergaming's obvious motivational agenda is a useful cue for investigating how ideology functions in ads in general and in advergames in particular. For game designer and scholar Gonzalo Frasca, advergaming's nascent critical potential lies in its ability to prompt gamers into considering gaming's simulational rhetoric. He notes (2003: 225):

An agency can place an ad in a magazine to enumerate the set of gizmos in a new car, but images, sound and text are not enough if they want their audience to be able to play around with them. In such a case, a simulated environment provides an experience that traditional advertising cannot deliver. As advergaming grows in popularity, it will hopefully also spread the idea that games may not just be a form of entertainment. Gaming literacy will some day make players aware that games are not free of ideological content and certainly advergames will play a role in this education because they have a clear agenda.

In the foregoing pages, we could have limited our analysis to the ideological or simulational rhetoric of AS's advergames since the programming brand clearly interpellates its audience as niche consumers. But this perhaps obvious tack misses a more substantial point concerning these specific games' form and their producers' manner of address. The thoroughgoing parodic nature of the AS games is a snarky, meta-textual response to the popularization of the casual game form. Noted game designer and theorist Eric Zimmerman supports this view, opining, '... the downloadable casual games industry has evolved into something *more* clone-driven and genre-bound than the so-called hardcore game industry that it sought to make an end-run around. So, the downloadable casual games industry has become a parody of itself' (emphasis in original, Juul, 2010: 101).

Parody and paracasualness may make the advergame palatable, but it also encourages the gamer to reflect on form and content. More than simply encouraging fans to spend more time with the AS brand, the parodic-ironic stance of these games offers an affinity space to strengthen the shared sensibilities of the multifaceted taste culture of the brand's fans. Although these are casual games by some measures, there is something far from casual taking place. When a fan like Explosivo_420 posts, 'You love me, You REALLY love me', (October 7, 2010) in response to the release of *Hemp Tycoon*, one sees clearly that these games are an integral ingredient of the AS experience that gives fans reason to feel that they are in the right place.

Notes

1. We have chosen to use the stylized '[adult swim]' moniker throughout this article because it is the network's chosen logo and because it contains a rich amount of semiotic weight. The use of the brackets sets it apart from surrounding text in much the same way that the programming block is bracketed off from the daytime Cartoon Network schedule. It is also a visual indicator of how the network carefully markets its

niche media taste culture that, while containing more than television content, cordons off a space for a constellation of multimedia texts, aesthetics, and practices. Finally, the bracketing recalls a bird's-eye view of a municipal swimming pool, a space whose scheduling the brand conjures metaphorically in defining its space. The games mentioned are available at: games.adultswim.com.

2. For review, visit <http://www.adultswim.ca/>
3. The anime programming has been a complicating factor in the labeling of the programming block. Prior to [adult swim]'s (AS's) existence, it was incorporated into the Cartoon Network schedule as a block called 'Toonami', which was included in AS's ratings when it was split into its own network in 2005. Turner discontinued use of the Toonami name in 2008 ('Cartoon Network', 2008). However, in 2012, Toonami was revived and used again as a descriptor for the Saturday night block of anime, while still retaining the AS branding as well (Turner Broadcasting, 2012).
4. These sites of extratextual discourse are often categorized under the broad heading of 'paratexts' (Genette, 1997) and have been examined in television studies (Gray, 2010) and game studies (Jones, 2008). In fact, fan labor is so intense in gaming culture that commercial firms have devised multifarious ways of harnessing this collective energy to create a cottage industry of paratextual activities – from facilitating cheating to helping gamers with their cosplay (see Consalvo, 2007; Newman, 2008).
5. As of January 2013, *Squidbillies: Floor It* was available on a few casual game aggregation sites, including Free Web Arcade (<http://www.freewebarcade.com/game/squidbillies-floor-it/>). No working version of *The Venture Bros: Flight of The Monarch* is available, though mention of it exists on fan blog posts (Abercrombie, 2010).
6. It is worth noting that the site itself does not use these genre classifications, instead opting for alternate categories, including 'puzzle', 'action', and 'twitchy'. Many games exist in multiple categories.
7. While it is apparent that there are numerous spelling mistakes and grammatical errors in these comment board posts, we are not correcting them in order to retain the conversational and communal tone of the posts. We are also not inserting (*sic*) for each mistake as it would quickly clutter up the quotations and reduce legibility. While it may be obvious as a widely shared convention of online message boards and forums, it is also worth noting that the usernames are pseudonymous, allowing users to separate their off-line personae from their online activities.
8. With 19,054,405 plays, *Hemp Tycoon* stood as the fourth most played game listed on the Web site as of July 25, 2013, over 2 years after its initial release.

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