Introduction: Special section on platform studies

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INTRODUCTION: SPECIAL SECTION ON PLATFORM STUDIES

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This special section of *Digital Culture & Education* comprises a number of short pieces on the topic of platform studies. Platform studies is an interdisciplinary approach borne out of the intersection of computer science, design studies, and media studies, and finding substantial purchase in the analysis of digital games and culture. Furthermore, it is finding increased usage as a historic method for game and media studies, as the consoles and computers of yesteryear are being considered in a new light.

The history of platform studies in the humanities is short, but influential. Keating and Cambrosio, writing in 2003, open up the curious existence of something called a platform to the humanities. Both similar and different to the idea of a computer platform, the concept evoked a useful model for thinking on how technical systems operated. A platform, for Keating and Cambrosio was at least partly a mental map of infrastructure: at times a map of bureaucratic relations, at other times a map of circuitry. The model remains the concept that allows the human mind to grasp what is behind the screen, in the liminal space between interface and system.

Montford and Bogost's 2009 book, *Racing the Beam*, opened up the concept of the platform as a research methodology for game and media studies. This work was the first in the 'Platform Studies' book series, and founded 'platform studies' as a method. The goal here is twofold – firstly, to create a research agenda which is capable of addressing and unpacking the games systems of yesteryear as discrete objects, creating an ontology of different devices. Secondly, the agenda shifts to an epistemological project. Once the gaming device has been identified it can then be unpacked, such that the changes in gaming and games development can be mapped over the decades. In doing this it is possible to see that a platform is rarely a discrete object, and is subject to changes, both subtle and severe, over its lifetime.

A year later, in 2010, Tarleton Gillespie would write "The politics of 'platforms'" – an article that has since been well-cited within media studies. The piece points to the many investments that inform a platform, and Gillespie bridges out the concept of a platform from the technical and conceptual interstices between software and hardware. The platform, Gillespie attests, is not just a technical concept – that is, it is not solely for the programmer, the academic, or the analyst – it is also for the public and the politician. The platform is a discursively neutralising concept, which raises up the idea of empty, vacant ground, waiting to be populated (but never filled) by the fertile outputs of the modern prosumer. Gillespie's approach draws in the platform as a political concept as well as a technical one. A platform both stakes an ideology through its technical interface while simultaneously avoiding any mention of politics.

Leorke, writing in *Digital Culture & Education*, maps out a number of constraints for platform studies. Leorke's work, "Rebranding the platform: the limitations of 'platform studies'" (2012) is one that takes account of the project of platform studies, as begun by Bogost and Montford. Specifically, Leorke locates the problem for the methodology in the fetishisation of platforms as a research object, specifically that the mold set out in *Racing the Beam* is so structured that nothing else in the series deviates from this approach. Such an observation identifies a potential theme that the emergent discipline of platform studies must be aware of: platform studies must retain a methodological approach that

connects more broadly to media theory if it is to continue to have the purchase that allows it to make dynamic interventions.

In this special issue, the authors respond to 'platform studies' both to advance platform studies as a discipline, and to identify its limits.

By reference to the BBC Microcomputer, Alison Gazzard argues that platform studies needs to look 'beyond the book'. Specifically, Gazzard would see platform studies move past the "nostalgic qualities they are so often defined and remembered by." In doing this, one of the key approaches that she advocates is preservation of these platforms such the games and other media can still be played and operated on these machines. The implicit issue here is that the extinction, by whatever means, of a game platform would effectively lead to the subsequent loss of all manner of games. While the cartridges or floppy discs might remain, the platform which interprets and operates the code would no longer exist.

Casey O'Donnell argues for a greater technical understanding of platforms, particularly on the development side, so that platform studies is capable of discovering facts about the platform which exceed what the developers and producers already know. In particular, O'Donnell points to the important role that developer communities have played in terms of critiquing what we might call 'platforms as a means of development', and furthermore, noting how this critique is in turn taken up to recast the development systems for games consoles. In essence, O'Donnell addresses how the concept of a platform becomes open to debate, and thus opens space for critique to change the nature of a platform itself.

Raiford Guins engages closely with the work of Montford and Bogost, specifically within an educational paradigm. What Guins has drawn out of the exercise is an interrogative question constructed by students from the first year of teaching *Racing the Beam*: "what is the research value of a platform studies approach for the writing of game history?" Guins offers no solutions, because the question itself becomes a research question to guide future inquiry. If anything, Guins indicates that *Racing the Beam* has held an important role in fostering an inquiring mindset in students, particularly insofar as it pushes students into questioning both the social and the engineering aspects of videogames. The way that he challenges the platforms studies paradigm is novel. Rather than think 'outside the box' Guins suggests that the box (i.e. the console's case, or housing) has a certain aesthetics that must be considered. What decisions and values have been considered in the process of the aesthetic construction of the gaming device in order for it to have seen the consumer uptake that allowed a device to have purchase on the history of videogaming.

Samuel Tobin points to the Nintendo DS as a case study of a broader interpretation to platform studies. Indeed, Tobin points to the difficulty in addressing a games platform that players claimed "wasn't something they were really in to." Players were reluctant to commit to interviews as informants, because they didn't feel an enthusiasm for their form of play. Tobin, instead, shifts online to engage in an ethnography of play for the Nintendo DS, concluding that 'space' is a key determinant in the forms of play available to the platform. In claiming that his research into the Nintendo DS would "not have really fit the series" by Montfort and Bogost, Tobin is in fact expanding the research methods available for platform studies – something that Leorke considers necessary for the continued growth and development of the concept.

References

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Biographical information

Robbie Fordyce is a researcher on the Melbourne Network Society Institute project 'the Domestic 3D Printing Initiative', and a research assistant to the Australian Research Council project 'Avatars and Identity'. His primary research interests are 3D printing, videogames, globalization and activism, often through the lens of post-autonomist Marxist thought. He has previously been published in *ephemera*, *Games and Culture*, and *The Fibreculture Journal*.

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