



Digital Culture & Education (DCE)

Publication details, including instructions for authors
<http://www.digitalcultureandeducation.com/>

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Online Publication Date: 14th November 2016

To cite this Article: Tobin, S. (2016). In praise of limits *Digital Culture & Education*, 8(2), 173-77.

URL: <http://www.digitalcultureandeducation.com/cms/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/tobin.pdf>

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IN PRAISE OF LIMITS

Samuel Tobin

Abstract: *This argues for a focus on context and space in the study of mobile play. Platform Studies is examined as a worthy alternate method. The author reflects on the difficulties in studying quotidian and mobile play practices, presents some methodical solutions and assembles a review of helpful literature.*

Key Words: Platform Studies, Nintendo, Mobile, Portable, Everyday Life, Method, Context, Space, Everyday Life

When Tom Apperley asked me to write something for this platform studies oriented issue of *Digital Culture & Education* I was at first a bit confused as I don't think of myself as an expert on platform studies or a participant in platform studies' debates. However, I had recently published *Portable Play in Everyday Life: the Nintendo DS*, a book about that mobile game system and its players. Why, then, do I resist calling my book, which is a study of a game system, a platform study? The question I want to address here is not how I managed to avoid or failed to perform a platform study, but rather what we might learn about games studies and platforms studies by looking at an alternate way to approach a system, an object, a thing with which people play.

Portable Play could have been a platform study, or rather someone could have written (indeed may yet write) a platform study of the Nintendo DS. Nick Montfort, one of the founders of the field and editors of the book series at MIT was generous with comments on an earlier version of the manuscript and it would be disingenuous for me to deny that I would've liked my book to be a part of the platform studies series. But the reality is that my book would not have really fit the series.

To understand this gaming system and the ways it works (and doesn't work) for these indifferent, occasional players I had to address the DS from multiple perspectives and at different registers. I focused less on the DS programs, texts and game spaces than on the ways in which the DS as object and system is talked about and imagined by its casual users. *Portable Play in Everyday Life* is consonant with platform studies' focus on materiality and the affordances of things, and divergent in research methods, with its analysis of player discourse about the way the DS fits into everyday life. While in the book I discuss the ways in which the DS functions technically, with its ARM7 and 9 processors and touch screens and proprietary Wi-Fi protocols, I do so in order to better understand how players, not game designers, understand this object.

I came to the Nintendo DS not as a player but as someone who started to notice it and objects like it (the Sony Vita but also older Game Boys and smart phones) on my daily subway commute and this perspective colored my research and eventual book. My study of the Nintendo DS grew not out of a desire to study video games or platforms, but rather a desire to study how people use devices to cope with the demands of everyday contemporary urban life, demands Walter Benjamin explored in the Arcades Project, which was a seminal text for my research. It was Benjamin's ambivalent approach to his era's media milieu that led in part to my decision to focus on how the Nintendo DS fits into the lives of people who use it while commuting, waiting, and killing time. I came to see the DS as a cousin of earlier media people used to cope with the demands of their day to day lives, like the paperback novels and newspapers

discussed by Benjamin's (1999) and the early cinema as discussed in Siegfried Kracauer's "The Mass Ornament" (1927), as well as more recent media examined by mobile scholars like Mizuko Ito and her team (2009), and game studies' precedents like David Sudnow's study of his son's arcade play (1983) and Erving Goffman's (1961) discussion of prisoner's play with balls and walls. These studies are connected to the studies of the politics and promises of the practices of everyday life, as exemplified in the work of Michel de Certeau (2002) and Henri Lefebvre (2002, 2008). I was concerned with issues of everyday life, but also of attention and distraction and this helped me develop a sociological and critical theoretical framework for my study. It is this sociological framework that, at least in part, differentiates my work from platform studies, even as I share many (material) concerns with it.

I had a research object (the DS) and a conceptual framework, but I ran into a significant problem finding a workable research method. People I approached would not agree to being interviewed for my ethnographic study of DS players. Potential informants with DS in hand whom I approached at a video game fan convention in Philadelphia explained to me that they weren't interested in talking about their DS as it wasn't something they were really that in to. They were at the convention because they were fans of other gaming systems; they were dismissive of the games that played on the DS while they waited for their turn at the consoles and real games. Temporarily stymied, I went where we go whenever we are out of options: I went online.

It was on game forums where I found lots of people who wanted to talk about the DS. They weren't fans, either, but they went to the DS forums to search for tips on what people might think would be a good game for a long flight, or how to clean the second screen, or to see if other people hated having to yell into the microphone when playing certain games. I found people who talked about the DS but only in passing because then (this has changed some with the rise of the StreetPass function) the DS wasn't something that people thought of as an important system; it was, for most of its players, beneath notice. This unnoticeable and unremarkable quality was what made the DS and its users interesting to me. I was interested in the DS and its users not because the DS is an exceptional gaming platform or DS users exceptionally intense fans, but just the opposite, because the DS is a good enough device, on which to play games that are good enough to help people get through commuting and killing time in waiting rooms and other ordinary challenges of everyday life.

My approach worked well to highlight certain aspects of the system, including the affordances of the interface (an at the time novel touch screen) and a particular kind of mobility (informed by its size and ability to be closed and paused at once) and contingency based on how the DS fit into gaps in daily life and co-exists with other devices in player's lives. My approach did not address many things we might want to know about the DS, from how players mod game carts, to the ways in which those carts were manufactured, and the way the code in them was written/compiled. I didn't address these topics in part because they do not fall within my area of expertise, but primarily because such issues are not central to my project's goal of understanding the ways the DS fits into people's everyday lives. To understand this quality of fitting in we do need to understand the affordances and the limits of the DS from the perspective of users and their lives. For me the most compelling point of Monfort and Bogost's *Racing the Beam* is their emphasis on limits, and on understanding what a machine allows and, in turn, what people can do with it. Where *Racing the Beam* shows how the VCS's "remarkable hardware design" restricted and demanded creative and in some cases odd programming and design decisions, I identified how the DS restricts and demands creative and odd playing and consumption practices (2009).

In my own DS play experiences and in the thousands of online comments and

conversations which made up my corpus of data I found that these practices were based not on inherent qualities of the games available for the DS, but rather on the intersection of the properties of a given game or game genre with the context and space in which the game was going to be played. The player reviews and recommendations I found online used context as the key factor for determining a game's value. Space informed player game choice, interface use (especially sound and touch screen) play style and attitude, almost every aspect of DS use. Because of this I made space the organizing principle of the book – the chapters are based not on game genres or, as in the case of *Racing the Beam*, on iconic game cartridges but rather on locations of play. This organizational difference between my study of the DS and Monfort and Bogost's of the VCS points to a larger split: theirs is a focus primarily (but not totally) on how and why people made these games the way that they did, whereas mine is about where and how people tend to play these games. Monfort and Bogost do important historical work, showing how what might otherwise seem arbitrary (say the way an AT-AT was rendered on screen in *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back*) was in fact contingent, and in response to technical contexts and limitations. In contrast, I show how what we might think of as an arbitrary decision about what game to play where and when is also contingent, and dependent less on inherent game qualities than on suitability of games to be played in specific contexts.

My book is organized by locations, but you won't learn much in *Portable Play* about the troubled kingdom of Hyrule or about where Professor Layton solves puzzles. My focus is not *gamespace* but *playspace*, which might be the couch, the bus stop, the bedroom, or even the toilet. I am not alone in this turning away from the screen. Raiford Guins' "Intruder Alert! Intruder Alert! Video Games in Space" and others like it helped me appreciate the importance of investigating the spatial and temporal contexts of play.

I can name some texts that, along with Guins' article, constitute a corpus of space and context oriented game work. This list shows some age, as these are just the texts I drew on for *Portable Play*. Some of the authors I mention here might even disagree that they belong here. I list them together because they share a conceptual angle that is also to some degree a methodological one, and one that points toward another way to study and think about game systems alongside and/or besides a platform approach. This list includes: Jesper Juul's *Casual Revolution*, Tom Apperley's *Global Rhythms*, Helen Cunningham's "Mortal Kombat and Computer Games Girls," James Newman's "The Myth of the Ergodic Videogame" and Jussi Parikka and Jaakko Suominen's "Victorian Snakes? Towards A Cultural History of Mobile Games and the Experience of Movement." I also include such non-game focused works as Anna McCarthy's *Ambient Television: Visual Culture and Public Space*, Larrisa Hjorth's *Mobile Media in the Asia Pacific: Gender and the Art of Being Mobile* and *Millennial Monsters* by Anne Allison. This list is neither exhaustive nor equally weighted. Space is a complicated concept in these texts: scale ranges from the micro to the macro, from the spaces of the body, the gesture and the pose to globalization. Context is as important as space to this list, in that these studies examine temporal as well as social, political and economic factors.

When we pay attention to the spaces and contexts of play, our focus shifts away from what goes on within the screen, away from story, representation, levels, mechanics, heuristics, and graphics. To the degree that these issues remain in our study, they tend to be filtered through contextual issues. For instance, in online discussions of play on the DS, time, pace and duration tend to trump *mise-en-scène*, narrative, or character. To make sense of such discussions requires expanding our notion of the core concerns of games studies and of the methods we use. As I have argued recently in *Analog Game Studies*, there are benefits in decentering the game and the digital (2015). This has implications specifically for platform studies, one of which is that in addition to studying the structures beneath games we should also look at the structures beyond them.

Approaching a game system in different ways, with different (if at time related) tools and questions not only delivers different results but changes and redefines the definitions of a gaming platform and a gaming system. The goal of my project was to understand what the DS was for the people who played, owned, talked about, and enjoyed it. These uses were informed, but not determined, by those who commissioned, designed, engineered, produced, wrote code for, and promoted it. The processors, hardware, electronics and materials which make up the DS, to say nothing of its multitudinous carts and programs, are the things with which players make up their experiences with and understandings of that system. However, as I studied these experiences and understandings I found that the technical affordances of the system mattered and made sense only when that system is seen in the context of the lives into which that system is inserted. Mine was therefore a study not of what the platform afforded designers or how it limited programmers, but what the object allowed and asked of its users. This perspective comes from my sociological training and interest in better understanding the world and lives that accommodate, allow and even demand technological play practices afforded by assemblages like the Nintendo DS. This perspective, method and framework determine what I can see, study, interpret and critique. For me the benefits of this approach out way its limits, indeed the limits are what shape the benefits, just as limits shaped the VCS and the DS. No one approach, no single set of questions or methods can be adequate for the study of an object. My book should not be the only thing written about the Nintendo DS, its games or its players.

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