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Platform Studies

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The study of contemporary media platforms such as gaming consoles, mobile phones, and social media websites can be understood as an extension of the longer history of apparatus theory, science and technology studies, and the archaeological turn in film and media studies. Platform studies also shares methodologies and theoretical frameworks with code studies, software studies, digital humanities, media infrastructure studies, and game studies. One of platform studies' primary methodologies is the close inspection and analysis of the materiality of media technologies. By emphasizing the matter of media devices—their chips, wires, slots, sensors, plastic and anodized aluminum bodies—in other words, their *thingness*, platform studies considers what this matter can tell us about the forces and conditions that shape our media landscape. Taking apart and examining her VCR, for example, Caetlin Benson-Allott finds a filmic architecture that suggests a less rigid and more pleasurable model of spectatorship and sexual difference than apparatus theory proposed. "With its feminized faceplate and technological interdependency," Benson-Allott writes, "the VCR dismantles the fantasy of the autonomous, masculine apparatus and leaves in its place a new sexual indeterminacy."[1]

Our contemporary media experiences increasingly happen on, across, and through discrete, proprietary, and niche digital media platforms: iPhone, Netflix, Facebook, Xbox, Oculus Rift, et cetera. These developments have inspired a more specific definition of platforms and platform studies in recent years. This narrower field is concerned specifically with the computational architecture of our digital devices and with the particular algorithms and protocols of social media. In Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost's definition, platforms are the "underlying computing systems" of culture and creativity, and platform studies makes possible the "serious consideration of circuits, chips, peripherals, and how they are integrated

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and used."[2] The study of video games has been a particularly important locus for both defining and practicing platform studies. When Montfort and Bogost inaugurated their Platform Studies book series for MIT Press, they conceptualized platforms as "the foundations of digital media, . . . both hardware and software, that developers and users depend upon for artistic, literary, and gaming development."[3] In the first book in the series, they applied this approach to the Atari Video Computer System, and many of the subsequent books have also been close analyses of specific gaming consoles. In figuring the platform as the overlooked and under-theorized material base of digital creativity, platform studies extends the structural metaphor of "levels" from game studies, which inherited it from computer science's geological metaphor of "layered" computational architecture.[4]

Defining a broad scholarly project premised on the specificity of gaming platforms has the effect of clarifying its conceptual limitations and pointing to where feminist interventions into platform studies are most necessary. "Bachelor machine" is the term Constance Penley borrowed from Michel Carrouges in the 1980s to describe the way film theory's focus on "the apparatus" reproduced a blindness to sexual difference among its theoreticians.[5] The narrow definition of platform studies that has recently taken hold can have a similar "bacheloresque" effect, reproducing methodologies and epistemologies with no need for gender, race, sexuality, or other types of difference. In Montfort and Bogost's model of platforms as the foundation of computational systems, for example, the player's body, identity, and audiovisual representations are peripheral to the primacy of the hardware. Focusing too myopically on platforms, then, tends to reproduce histories and analyses that ignore the complicated differences and relationships between technologies as things and bodies as things—as systems differently encoded by race, ability, gender, class, ethnicity, nationality, and sexuality. Game studies' formalist and affective attachments to platforms ends up, Laine Nooney writes, "simply rearranging actor-network deck chairs, envisioning histories and theories without corporeal or discursive bodies, histories or theories lost in their own love for the mechanism's indifference to the body."[6]

In their critique of the subfield, Thomas Apperley and Jussi Parikka write, "Platforms are not recalled and rediscovered through platform studies, rather *in the process of 'doing' platform studies, a uniform platform is produced*."[7] If the subfield is meant to address media studies' lack of attention to *things*, the "chips and wires," it should then also address, as Benson-Allott suggests, "the relation of chips and wires to other things," such as the ways platforms cannot be disentangled from the social nexuses of the bodies, identities, and media

representations of their users and creators.[8] Feminist approaches resist this myopic tendency and instead look to where the perceived boundaries of platforms break down or blur: between code and interface, between object and subject, between the materiality of the platform and the materiality of the raced and gendered bodies that create and use them. Similar to how many feminist writers on film worked within and against the limitations of apparatus theory, feminist media scholars use and creatively abuse the platform metaphor in order to expand our understanding of the relationship between media technologies and our social worlds.

The "levels" metaphor of platform studies has epistemological and methodological consequences: it spatially reinforces dubious claims in digital media studies that identities and their representations are merely "surface effects" of a deeper and more significant technological structure.[9] Recently, queer and feminist game studies scholars have called this dismissal of identity and representation into question.[10] For example, considering how race, gender, and sexuality intersect in video games and gaming culture, Jennifer Malkowski and TreaAndrea M. Russworm write, "Representation in game studies must be viewed as a system that functions as akin to—rather than as a distraction from—the discipline's more celebrated, hard-core objects of study."[11] Feminist approaches tend to disturb and question the discrete levels and boundaries of platform studies to expose the epistemological and ontological limits these impose for media studies. For example, Rena Bivens's research on how Facebook governs the expression of the gender identities of its users demonstrates how platforms are not discrete or monolithic things, but rather constituted and negotiated through multiple and even conflicting design choices, programming mandates, and stakeholders. The interfaces of social media platforms, as Bivens demonstrates, are not merely the effects of deeper computational structures, but actually produce their own complicated effects and may do so separately from the design choices at a deeper "underlying" level. While the design of Facebook's public-facing interface, for example, now allows nonbinary, trans, and genderqueer users to customize their gender identities, the company still actively preserves the male-female binary at the database level in the interest of delivering data to their advertisers. "Considering both surface and deep software levels," Bivens writes, "Facebook's software has always existed somewhere between a rigid gender binary and fluid spectrum."[12]

Imagining media platforms as sealed "black boxes" reinforces a similar sealing off of subjectivity, agency, race, and sexuality. Rather than being discrete objects, platforms, and the ways they connect us technologically and socially to others, are porous, penetrating, and penetrable. Analyzing the network cards that

connect our devices to the internet, Wendy Chun and Sarah Friedland find a fundamental "promiscuity," even "sluttiness," in our platforms in how they must constantly expose our data to the network in order to function properly. The disjuncture between the radical openness and sharing of internet protocols and the gendered discourses around "slut shaming" and "revenge porn" on social media platforms, they argue, shore up fantasies of personal and "sealed off" technologies and "[figure] the online subject as open, vulnerable, and perhaps asking for it: that is, as traditionally female."[13] There is a relationship between the ways platform studies mischaracterizes digital technologies as "black boxes" that can only be exposed by a certain kind of penetrating scholarly gaze and the discourses the shore up the idea that women are "ruined" through the networked exposure of their bodies and sexuality.

In identifying platforms as discrete, stable, and foundational objects, platform studies runs the risk of mimicking and reinforcing the rhetoric of platform marketing that tells us that these devices are foundational to our work and social lives.[14] Feminist platform studies points us toward the larger global context and impact of digital media platforms—their production, use, and relationship to media infrastructure.[15] Sarah Sharma asks us to consider whose lives these devices and their applications are meant to improve. From smartphones that "seem to be doing the work of an overbearing and meddling mother . . . monitoring, anticipating needs, provoking sharing, sending reminders" to apps that outsource our transportation, house cleaning, and food delivery to an increasingly precarious labor force, "every new technology brings with it the question, and often the answer, of what or who this new technology will take care of."[16] Increasingly, Sharma argues, our platforms are designed to reproduce patriarchal and misogynist fantasies of care, exit, and escape that are built on the backs of women and people of color. About her VCR, Benson-Allott writes, "Spill its guts and the first thing it will tell you is that its chips were made in Indonesia while its walls were poured and assembled in Japan for a parent company in the United States."[17] All digital media platforms are dependent on a global network of mineral extraction, electronics manufacturing and assembly, and communications infrastructures. Building on Donna Haraway's concept of the "integrated circuit of technoculture," Lisa Nakamura demonstrates how the bodies of women of color who assemble electronic components "become part of digital platforms by providing the labor needed to make them."[18] The laboring bodies of electronics assembly, Nakamura and others remind us, are the actual platforms—the underlying and usually overlooked foundation—on which our digital creativity and expression depend.

Writing about the ways computer operating systems in the mid-twentieth century encoded US racial dynamics and segregation, Tara McPherson asks, "Might we ask if there is not something *particular to the very forms* of electronic media that seems to encourage . . . a movement that partitions race off from the specificity of media forms? . . . Further, might we come to understand that our own critical methodologies are the heirs to this epistemological shift?"[19] Feminist media scholars ask similar questions about platform studies and the ways its narrowly bounded object creates an artificial partition between the chips, wires, and code and the bodies and identities that interact with them. Whereas platform studies tends to bracket culture and context in order to gaze at the hard body of the computational architecture, feminist media scholars call for the creation of new platforms and new methodologies guided by attention to difference. McPherson writes, "We should design our tools differently, in a mode that explicitly engages power and difference from the get-go, laying bare our theoretical allegiances and exploring the intra-actions of culture and matter."[20] Similarly, Kara Keeling calls for queer operating systems that acknowledge the racial and gendered encoding and partitioning described by McPherson "while still striving to forge new relationships and connections."[21]

Platform studies itself can be a bit of a bachelor machine, but feminist interventions remind us that platforms, like their creators, users, and critics, can also be curiously porous, queerly promiscuous, and radically leaky. ■

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NOTES

1. Caetlin Benson-Allott, "VCR Autopsy," *Journal of Visual Culture* 6, no. 2 (2007): 180.

2. Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost, *Racing the Beam: The Atari Video Computer System* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 2. See also Ian Bogost and Nick Montfort, "Platform Studies: Frequently Questioned Answers," *Proceedings of Digital Arts and Culture 2009*, University of California, Irvine.

3. MIT Press Platform Studies Series description, https://mitpress.mit.edu/books/series/platform-studies.

4. Montfort and Bogost, *Racing the Beam*, 145–47.

5. Constance Penley, "Feminism, Film Theory, and the Bachelor Machines," in *The Future of an Illusion: Film, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 57–80.

6. Laine Nooney, "A Pedestal, a Table, a Love Letter: Archaeologies of Gender in Videogame History," *Game Studies* 13, no. 2 (2013): http://gamestudies.org/1302/articles/nooney.

7. Thomas Apperley and Jussi Parikka, "Platform Studies' Epistemic Threshold," *Games and Culture*, published online December 13, 2015, 4–5, emphasis in original.

8. Caetlin Benson-Allott, "Platform," in *Debugging Game History: A Critical Lexicon*, ed. Henry Lowood and Raiford Guins (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 346.

9. For examples of this argument see Ian Bogost, *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 27; Alexander R. Galloway, *The Interface Effect* (Cambridge, England: Polity, 2012), 63.

10. Adrienne Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gaming Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw, eds., *Queer Game Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); Shira Chess, *Ready Player Two: Women Gamers and Designed Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); Jennifer Malkowski and TreaAndrea M. Russworm, eds., *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017); Aubrey Anable, *Playing with Feelings: Video Games and Affect* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

11. Malkowski and Russworm, "Introduction," in *Gaming Representation*, 3.

12. Rena Bivens, "The Gender Binary Will Not Be Deprogrammed: Ten Years of Coding Gender on Facebook," *New Media and Society* 19, no. 6 (2017): 882.

13. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun and Sarah Friedland, "Habits of Leaking: Of Sluts and Network Cards," *differences* 26, no. 2 (2015): 9.

14. Tarleton Gillespie, "The Politics of 'Platforms,'" *New Media and Society* 12, no. 3 (2010): 347–64.

15. See for example Larissa Hjorth, *Mobile Media in the Asia-Pacific: Gender and the Art of Being Mobile* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008); Lisa Parks and Rahul Mukherjee, "From Platform Jumping to Self-Censorship: Internet Freedom, Social Media, and Circumvention Practices in Zambia," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 14, no. 3 (2017): 231–37.

16. Sarah Sharma, "Exit and the Extensions of Man," *Transmediale Online Journal*, April 2017, https://transmediale.de/content/exit-and-the-extensions-of-man.

17. Benson-Allott, "VCR Autopsy," 179.

18. Lisa Nakamura, "Indigenous Circuits: Navajo Women and the Racialization of Early Electronic Manufacture," *American Quarterly* 66, no. 4 (2014): 920.

19. Tara McPherson, "U.S. Operating Systems at Mid-Century: The Intertwining of Race and UNIX," in *Race after the Internet*, ed. Lisa Nakamura and Peter Chow-White (New York: Routledge, 2011), 24, emphasis in original.

20. Tara McPherson, "Designing for Difference," *differences* 25, no. 1 (2014): 182.

21. Kara Keeling, "Queer OS," *Cinema Journal* 53, no. 2 (2014): 154.