Platforms in the Cloud: On the Messy Ephemerality of Platforms

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INTRODUCTION
This essay explores the ephemeral character of platforms and the critical role that theoretical frameworks play in making sense of platforms as socio-technical assemblages. Through an exploration aimed at further complicating the Nintendo Wii as platform and exploring *Twitter* as platform, the essay considers the crucial role of theory in the unpacking of black boxes. In an attempt to render platforms accessible, it is quite possible they have been presented as more opaque, and their analysts have not adequately debugged the messes they have encountered.

As others have noted, the conceptual category of platform has enjoyed a great deal of scholarly attention, which has not been explored by that of Platform Studies (Leorke, 2012). According to the more orthodox version, *Twitter* was simply "software that runs on platforms," (Montfort & Bogost, 2009, p. 3) rather than a real platform, "[w]hatever the programmer takes for granted when developing, and whatever from another side, the user is required to have working in order to use particular software," (Montfort & Bogost, 2009, pp. 2-3). Yet, what was interesting was that as I attempted to explore *Twitter* games from this perspective, I increasingly grappled with the ephemerality of precisely what a platform was. At first I assumed it was a consequence of my analytic transgression, but in reality, similar questions could have been leveled at any number of platforms. In this essay, I returned to Codename Revolution: The Nintendo Wii Platform (Jones & Thiruvathukal, 2012) and began to re-ask the question, "Where is the platform?"

THE EPHEMERALITY OF THE WII
In the spring of 2007, Chris Hecker, a game developer long associated with the Game Developers Conference (GDC), and in particular as part of the perennial "rant" session, spoke. He began that years rant with the relatively simple, but spirited statement, "The Wii is a piece of shit!" This statement sent shockwaves through the enthusiast press surrounding the game industry. Game developers present in the room at that time, however, cheered and applauded. It was striking to see such heated enthusiast press coverage over something, which for developers was a humorous non-event. Hecker went further, mocking the console, presenting a slide that made it appear as if the "severely underpowered" machine was simply two GameCube consoles Duct-Taped together.

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Again, the audience roared. What struck me as funny, at the time, was that the original Development Kits, or DevKits, for the Wii actually *were* GameCube DevKits with a few additional wired inputs. At that moment, in 2007, I was nearing the end of a three and a half-year stint of ethnographic participant observation at a game studio working on a PS2 and Wii title. For this team, the Wii, as a platform, started as a GameCube DevKit, not two of them taped together, just a single GameCube DevKit. I suspect that many game developers in the room that day were in on that aspect of the joke as well.

Nintendo's broader software SDKs, included with Wii DevKits, contain all sorts of utility libraries that encode ideas about how games ought to be developed. Memory use and allocation is actually quite different between games and "typical" software (O'Donnell, 2012). Nintendo's SDKs explicitly encourage the use of memory pools. The format that images and data take within the file system, assumed by the Wii's underlying operating system, are also encoded in calls specific to the Wii's SDK. The entire SDK remains a decedent of the GameCube's SDK. What about the wide use of the scripting language Lua by many Nintendo developers? All of these are part of the platform according to Montfort and Bogost, but it's most certainly not part of Codename Revolution. So, where precisely is the platform?

ON TWITTER GAMES

What makes Twitter an interesting platform is that it tends to exhibit many of the issues that are core to exploring what precisely is meant by platforms and our analysis of them. In February of 2011, the third Global Game Jam kicked off with an accompanying "achievement," titled, "Aggregation," which required that whatever game was created "uses or combines existing web services and online data (e.g. Google Maps, Gmail, Twitter, Facebook, airline services, news, stocks, etc.) as part of the gameplay." Out of this a handful of games were developed that made use of these elements.

Returning to the question of platforms, however, how would one characterize either of these game's platform? Neither is reducible to HTML5 or JavaScript or JSON or Flash or PHP or Twitter or Chrome or WebKit or HTTP. Even those objects have shifted and mutated over time. What does it mean to be a platform in contexts such as these?

Yet, in the formulation of Racing the Beam, ostensibly to widen the readership of the series, much of the theoretical platform is never hinted at. The lifeblood of a platform studies text is its own platform; the assumptions made by the researchers. These assumptions are the system through which material is made sense of and put into motion in the series. One can only suspect what precisely that underlying system was for Bogost and Montfort, though one rooted in Object Oriented Ontology (OOO) and Alien Phenomenology seems most likely.

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