A New "Platform" for Games Research?: An Interview with Ian Bogost and Nick Montfort

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Any time two of the leading video and computer game scholars -- Ian Bogost (Georgia Tech) and Nick Montfort (MIT) -- join forces to write a book, that's a significant event in my book. When the two of them lay down what amounts to a new paradigm for game studies as a field -- what they are calling "Platform Studies" -- and apply it systematically -- in this case, to the Atari system -- this is something which demands close attention to anyone interested in digital media. So, let me urge you to check out Racing the Beam: The Atari Video Computer System, released earlier this spring by MIT Press. In the interview that follows you will get a good sense of what the fuss is all about as the dynamic duo lay out their ideas for the future of games studies, essentially further raising the ante for anyone who wants to do serious work in the field. As someone who would fall far short of their ambitious bar for the ideal games scholar, I read this discussion with profoudly mixed feelings. I can't argue with their core claim that the field will benefit from the arrival of a generation of games scholars who know the underlying technologies -- the game systems -- as well as they know the games. I certainly believe that the opening up of a new paradigm in games studies will only benefit those of us who work with a range of other related methodologies. If I worry, it is because games studies as a field has moved forward through a series of all-or-nothing propositions: either you do this or you aren't really doing game studies. And my own sense is that fields of research grow best when they are expansive, sucking in everything in their path, and sorting out the pieces later.

That said, I have no reservations about what the authors accomplish in this rigorous, engaging, and ground-breaking book. However you think of games studies as an area of research, there will be things in this book which will provoke you and where Bogost and Montfort are concerned, I wouldn't have it any other way.

Henry: Racing the Beam represents the launch of a new publishing series based on what you are calling "Platform Studies." What is platform studies and why do you think it is an important new direction for games research?

Nick: Platform studies is an invitation to look at the lowest level of digital media -- the computing systems on which many sorts of programs run, including games. And specifically, it's an invitation to consider how those computing systems function in technical detail, how they constrain and enable creative production, and how they relate to culture.

Ian: It's important to note that platform studies isn't a particular approach; you can be more formalist or materialist, more anthropological or more of a computer scientist, in terms of how you consider a platform. No matter the case, you'll still be doing platform studies, as long as you consider the platform deeply. And, while platform studies is of great relevance to the study of video games, these studies can also be used to better understand digital art,

electronic literature, and other sorts of computational cultural production that happens on the computer.

Nick: In games research in particular, the platform seems to have a much lower profile as we approach 2010 than it did in the late 1970s and 1980s. Games are developed for both PC and Xbox 360 fairly easily, and few scholars even bother to specify which version of a such game they're writing about, despite differences in interface, in how these games are burdened with DRM, and in the contexts of play (to name just a few factors). At the same time, there are these recent platforms that feature unusual interfaces and limited computational power, relative to the big iron consoles: Nintendo's Wii and DS and Apple's iPhone.

Ian: And let's not forget that games are being made in Flash and for other mobile phones. Now, developers are very acutely aware of what these platforms can do and of how important it is to consider the platform level. But their implicit understanding doesn't always make it into wider discussions, and that understanding doesn't always connect to cultural concerns and to the history of gaming and digital media.

Nick: So, we think that by looking thoroughly at platforms, we will, first, understand more about game consoles and other game platforms, and will be able to both make better use of the ones we have (by creating games that work well with platforms) and also develop better ones. Beyond that, we should be able to work toward a better understanding of the creative process and the contexts of creativity in gaming and digital media.

Henry: What do you think has been lost in game studies as a result of a lack of attention to the core underlying technologies behind different game systems?

Nick: For one thing, there are particular things about how games function, about the interfaces they present, and about how they appear visually and how they sound which make no sense (or which can be attributed to causes that aren't really plausible) unless you make the connection to platform. You can see these in every chapter of Racing the Beam and probably in every interesting Atari VCS game.

Ian: And more simply put, video games are computational media. They are played on computers, often very weird computers designed only to play video games. Isn't it reasonable to think that observing something about these computers, and the relationship between each of them and the games that they hosted, would lead to insights into the structure, meaning, or cultural significance of such works?

Here's an example from the book: the graphical adventure genre, represented by games like The Legend of Zelda, emerged from Warren Robinett's attempts to translate the text-based adventure game Colossal Cave onto the Atari VCS. The machine couldn't display text, of course, so Robinett chose to condense the many actions one can express with language into a few verbs that could be represented by movement and collision detection. The result laid the groundwork for a popular genre of games, and it was inspired largely by the way one person negotiated the native abilities of two very different computers.

Nick: More generally, the platform is a frozen concept of what gaming should be like: Should it come in a fake wood-grain box that looks like a stereo cabinet and fits in the living room

along stereo components? Should it have two different pairs of controllers and difficulty switches so that younger and older siblings can play together with a handicap? Only if we look at the platform can we understand these concepts, and then go on to understand how the course of game development and specific games negotiate with the platform's concept.

Henry: Early on, there were debates about whether one needed to be a "gamer" to be able to contribute to games studies. Are we now facing a debate about whether you can study games if you can't read code or understand the technical schematics of a game system?

Nick: All sorts of people using all sorts of methods can make and have made contributions to game studies, and that includes non-ethnographers, non-lawyers, non-narratologists, and those without film studies backgrounds as well as people who can't read code or understand schematics. Games are a tremendous phenomenon, and it would be impossible for someone to have every skill and bit of background relevant to studying them. We're lucky that many different sorts of people are looking at games from so many perspectives.

That said, whether one identifies as a "gamer" is a rather different sort of issue than whether one understands how computational systems work. If your concern is for people's experience of the game -- how they play it, what meaning they assign to it, and how the experience relates to other game experiences -- then the methods that are most important to you will be the ones related to understanding players or interpreting the game yourself. But if you care about how games are made or how they work, it makes a lot of sense to know how to program (and how to understand programs) and to have learned at least the bare outlines of computer architecture.

Ian: Even if you want to thoroughly study something non-interactive, like cutscenes, won't you have to understand both codecs and the specifics of 3D graphics (ray tracing, texture mapping, etc.) to understand why certain choices were made in creating a cutscene? How can you really understand Geometry Wars without getting into the fact that vector graphics display hardware used to exist, and that the game is an attempt to recreate the appearance of those graphics on today's flat-panel raster displays? How could you begin to talk about the difference between two radically different and culturally relevant chess programs, Video Chess for the Atari VCS (which fit in 4K) and the world-dominating Deep Blue, without considering their underlying technical differences -- and going beyond noticing that one is enormously powerful and other minimal?

Nick: I certainly don't want to ban anyone from the field for not knowing about computing systems, but I also think it would be a disservice to give out game studies or digital media degrees at this point and not have this sort of essential technical background be part of the curriculum.

Henry: Does Platform Studies necessarily limit the field to writers who can combine technological and cultural expertise, a rare mix given the long-standing separation between C.P. Snow's "Two Cultures"? Or should we imagine future books as emerging through collaborations between writers with different kinds of expertise?

Nick: We definitely will encourage collaborations of this sort, and we know that collaborators will need all the encouragement they can get. It's unusual and difficult for humanists to collaborate. When the technical and cultural analysis that you need to do is demanding, though, as it is in a platform study, it's great to have a partner working with you.

Personally, I prefer for my literary and research collaborations to be with similar "cross-cultural" people, such as Ian; I don't go looking for a collaborator to balance me by knowing about all of the technical matters or all of the cultural and humanistic ones. It is possible for collaborators on one side to cross the divide and find others, though. Single-authored books are fine as well, and it's okay with me if the single author leans toward one "culture" or the other, or even if the author isn't an academic.

Ian: I also think that this two culture problem is resolving itself to some extent. When I look at my students, I see a very different cohort than were my colleagues in graduate school. I see a fluency in matters of technology and culture that defies the expectations of individual fields. So in some ways, I see the Platform Studies series as an opportunity for this next generation of scholars as much as it is for the current one, perhaps even more so.

When you think about it, popular culture in general is also getting over the two culture problem. There are millions of people out there who know something about programming computers. As I've watched the press and the public react to Racing the Beam, it's clear to me that discussions of hardware design and game programming are actually quite welcome among a general readership.

Henry: What relationship do you see between "platform studies" and the "science, technology and society" field?

Nick: A productive one. We're very much hoping that people in STS will be interested in doing platform studies and in writing books in the series. Books in the series could, of course, make important contributions in STS as well as in digital media.

Ian: Indeed, STS already tends strongly toward the study of how science and technology underlies things. Platform studies has something in common with STS in this regard. But STS tends to focus on science's impact on politics and human culture rather than human creativity. This latter area has typically been the domain of the humanities and liberal arts. One way to understand platform studies is as a kind of membrane between computing, STS, and the humanities. We think there's plenty of productive work to be done when these fields come together.

Henry: Why did you decide to focus on the Atari Video Computer System as the central case study for this book?

Ian: We love the Atari VCS. It's a platform we remember playing games on and still do. In fact, the very idea for platform studies came out of conversations Nick and I had about the Atari. We found ourselves realizing that a programmer's negotiation between platform and creativity takes place in every kind of creative computing application.

Nick: Another factor was historical. While contributing to the cultural understanding of video games a great deal, game studies hasn't looked to its roots enough. A console as influential as the Atari VCS deserved scholarly and popular attention beyond mere retro nostalgia. We wanted to bring that sort of analysis to bear.

Ian: Finally, I've been using the Atari VCS for several years now in my classes, both as an example and as an exercise. I have my Introduction to Computational Media class program small games on the system as an exercise in constraint. I also taught a graduate seminar entirely devoted to the system. Moreover, I often make new games for the system, some of which I'll be releasing this spring. So overall, the Atari VCS is a system that has been and remains at the forefront of both of our creative and critical interests.

In fact, I've continued to do platform studies research on the Atari VCS beyond the book. A group of computer science capstone students under my direction just completed a wonderful update to the "Stella" Atari VCS emulator, adding effects to simulate the CRT television. These include color bleed, screen texture, afterimage -- all matters we discuss in the book. I have a webpage describing the project at http://www.bogost.com/games/a_television_simulator.shtml.

Henry: You focus the book around case studies of a number of specific Atari titles from Adventure and Pac-Man to Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back. Can you say more about how these examples allowed you to map out the cultural impact and technical capacities of the Atari system?

Nick: The specific examples gave us the opportunity do what you can do with close readings: drill down into particular elements and see how they relate to a game, a platform and a culture. But we wouldn't have found the same insights if we had just picked a game, or six games from different platforms, and got to work. We used these games to see how programmers' understanding of the platform developed and how the situation of computer gaming changed, how people challenged and expanded the 1977 idea of gaming that was frozen into the Atari VCS when they put this wonderful machine together.

Ian: We also chose to focus on a specific period, the early years of the Atari VCS, so to speak, from 1977 to 1983. These games in particular allowed us to characterize that period, as programmers moved from their original understanding of this system -- one based on porting a few popular coin-op games -- to totally different and surprising ways of making games on it.

Henry: Platform Studies seems to align closely with other formalist approaches to games. Can it also be linked to cultural interpretation?

Nick: Formalist? Really? We were indeed very concerned with form and function in Racing the Beam, so I won't shun the label, but we tried to be equally attentive to the material situation of the Atari VCS and the cartridges and arcade games we discussed. For instance, we included an image of the Shark Jaws cabinet art so that the reader could look at the typography and decide whether Atari was attempting to refer to Speilberg's movie. We discuss the ramifications of using a cheaper cartridge interface in the VCS design, one that was missing a wire.

Ian: We should also remember the technical creativity that went into designing a system like the Atari VCS, or into programming games for it. The design of the graphics chip, for example, was motivated by a particular understanding of what it meant to play a game: two human players, side by side, each controlling a character on one side of the screen or another.

By the time David Crane created Pitfall! many years later, those understandings had changed. Pitfall! is a one-player game with a twenty minute clock. But it's also a wonderful mash-up of cultural influences: Tarzan, Indiana Jones, Heckle and Jeckle.

Nick: I'll admit that ours is a detailed analysis that focused on specifics (formal, material, technical) rather than being based around broad cultural questions: it's bottom-up rather than top-down. We're still trying to connect the specifics of the Atari VCS (and other platforms) to culture, though. The project is not only linked with, but part of, cultural interpretation.

Ian: I'd go even further; there's nothing particularly formalist about a platform studies approach, if formalism means a preference of material and structure over cultural reception and meaning. If anything, I think our approach offers a fusion of many influences, rather than an obstinate grip on a single one.