Platform Studies, Computational Essentialism, and Magic: The Gathering

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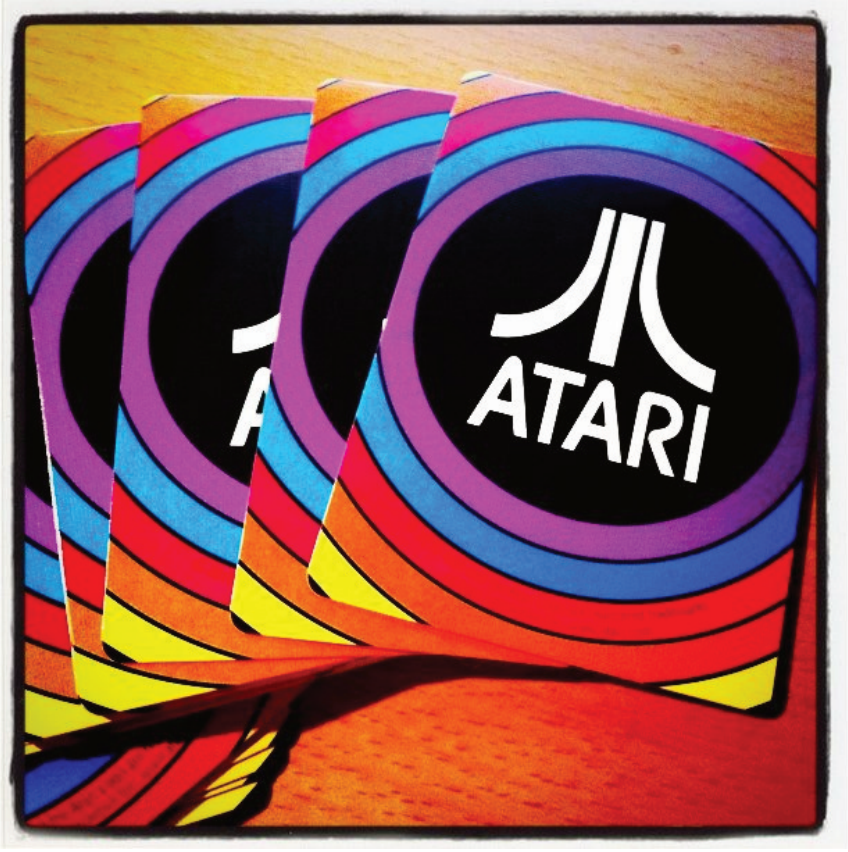
Platform studies has gained momentum since Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost[1] published their monograph on the Atari VCS in 2009. Presently there are seven books in the MIT Press series covering various digital platforms from older systems such as the BBC Micro[2] to modern ones like Nintendo Wii.[3] The series also focuses on computational systems, including the software platform Flash[4] and the visual peripheral S-C 4020.[5] Nathan Altice has broadened the scope of the platform studies framework, by arguing that playing cards can be understood as a platform.[6] Broadening the platform

1. Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost. Racing the Beam: The Atari Video Computer System. Platform Studies. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2009.
2. Alison Gazzard. Now the Chips Are Down: The BBC Micro. Platform Studies. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2016.
3. Steven E. Jones and George K. Thiruvathukal. Codename Revolution: The Nintendo Wii Platform. Platform Studies. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2012.
4. Anastasia Salter and John Murray. Flash: Building the Interactive Web. Platform Studies. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2014.
5. Zabet Patterson. Peripheral Vision: Bell Labs, the S-C 4020, and the Origins of Computer Art. Platform Studies. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2015.
6. Nathan Altice. "The Playing Card Platform." In Analog Game Studies: Volume I. Edited by Aaron Trammell, Evan Torner and Emma Leigh Waldron. ETC Press, 2016, 34–53.

studies framework to include analog games reveals a blind spot in the analytical frame—platform studies prioritizes the technical aspects of platforms over their cultural and social dynamics. This essay argues that better consideration of the cultural and social dynamics of platforms could strengthen the platform studies framework.

Magic: The Gathering[7] (1993) shares many of the defining aspects of platforms as they were put forward by Montfort and Boost.[8] Analyzing *Magic* provides new insight into the concept of platform, including its defining layers and the interactions between them. By refocusing the debate from *game machines* to *games*, I contest the rigid computational essentialism that privileges hardware and software over the cultural practices of player communities.

7. *Richard Garfield. Magic: The Gathering. Renton, Washington: Wizards of the Coast, 1993. http://magic.wizards.com/*
8. Magic has a long history, consists of many playable formats, and features a complex economy.



A rare set of Atari playing cards. Image by Kimili @Flickr CC BY-NC.

THE COMPUTATIONAL ESSENTIALISM OF PLATFORM STUDIES

The focus on computational systems in game studies creates an artificial disparity between digital and analog games. Not all analyses of platforms privilege the computational. For instance, Tarleton Gillespie argues that platforms are often the product of marketing strategies: "Platforms are platforms not necessarily because they allow code to be written or run, but because they afford an opportunity

to communicate, interact or sell."[9] Analog games are a product of a similar set of affordances, as they facilitate communication, interaction, and commerce. Although Nathan Altice brings analog games into the conversation around platform studies, he fits them into the established computational framework. He explicitly compares the mechanic of tapping to an upgrade of processor power: "To borrow a computational term, playing cards had a processor upgrade from one bit—face up or face down—to two, and that additional bit widened the spectrum of design possibilities."[10] Where Gillespie shows how platforms are explicitly related to social processes, Altice borrows the language of Montfort and Bogost to rethink analog games.

Culture sits at the margins of the platform studies discourse. While Montfort and Bogost distinguish five different levels of new media (reception/operation, interface, form/function, code, and platform)[11] these distinctions can be collapsed into the more inclusive categories of hardware, software and culture. In fact, the authors of the framework themselves often reduce the overall technological structure into the two categories of hardware and software which then interact with users and developers.[12] Although Montfort and Bogost occasionally try to stress the cultural dynamics of platforms,[13] their original framework is most interested in technical architecture. Similarly, Altice argues that the material and technical aspects of platforms form the main organizing principle of the dimensions of the playing card platform despite the rather rich examples of the cultural surround of playing cards. This case of computational

9. Tarrelton Gillespie. "The Politics of Platforms." New Media and Society Vol 12, Issue 3 (2010): p. 351
10. Altice, 2016, p. 35.
11. Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost. "Platform Studies: Levels." Platform Studies. http://platformstudies.com/levels.html.
12. They write: "The [note: platform studies] series investigates the foundations of digital media: the computing systems, both hardware and software, that developers and users depend upon for artistic, literary, gaming, and other creative development." Montfort and Bogost, 2009, p. VII
13. Montfort and Bogost, 2009, p. 2

essentialism reduces the importance of the cultural layer to reception and operation. Built into the platforms of are analog games are rich community practices that have been forgotten in this conversation—communities do more than operate games; they modify, develop, and share them, too.

We can use *Magic: The Gathering* to show some of the limits of Montfort and Bogost's argument. Following a typical platform studies approach we could claim that the hardware level in *Magic: The* Gathering[14] is represented by the available card pool (nearly 16,000 cards) and the software part consists of rules, errata and various playable formats. However, when we move beyond these computational essentialisms and into the cultural level, we see rich interactions which cannot be neatly packed into three (or more) separate categories. These practices encompass the metagame(s) established through play, deckbuilding and discussions, the processes of convergence between community and official formats, fannish practices such as card modifications and alterations[15] and the supposedly lucrative secondary markets of the game. Let us look at how the cultural dynamics of *Magic* problematize platform studies' analytic of layers.

THE HARDWARE LAYER

Rectangular two-sided cards may seem simple in comparison to technical artifacts of video game consoles. Nevertheless, Altice[16]

14. It is also important to note that the original card game has been adapted to the video game medium many times throughout its history, including the official digital competitive version in 2002. While this makes Magic: The Gathering a transmedia entity, for the sake of this essay I will focus primarily on the analog form of the game considering its status as a potential platform. However, the existence of both digital and analog versions suggests that the cultural aspects might be more decisive in the construction of a platform than the hardware and software layers. For more insight on the relationship between the analog and digital versions of Magic: The Gathering see: Aaron Trammell. "Magic: The Gathering in Material and Virtual Space: An Ethnographic Approach toward Understanding Players Who Dislike Online Play." In Meaningful Play 2010 Conference Proceedings. East Lansing, 2010.
15. Aaron Trammell. "Magic Modders: Alter Art, Ambiguity, and the Ethics of Prosumption." Journal of Virtual Worlds Research 6, no. 3 (2013): 1–14.
16. Altice, 2016.

shows the rich material dimensions of playing cards in general. Thus, playing cards are planar – two sides allow for displaying and concealment of information, uniform – identical size guarantees fairness of chance distributions, ordinal – cards allow to be organized and stacked into decks, spatial – card arrangements on a playing surface create meaning, as well as textural – texture and surface allow for handling and shuffling.

Magic: The Gathering cards follow many of the conventions presented by Altice. Considering the planar dimension, they usually have only one relevant side while the other bears the uniform pattern. Given the material nature of the cards, however, there is a low level of meaningful (gameplay-wise) physical interactions in *Magic: The Gathering*, most of which are limited to the uniform, ordinal and textural dimensions.[17]

Despite this, we must consider the degree to which external processes impact the game platform. While ordinality plays a major role in the game itself, manufacturing processes play a large part in drafts and the game's secondary market. The scarcity of cards is directly influenced by the practical constraints of the printing process and the distribution of cards among print sheets (which follow industry standards). These constraints impose outside limitations on the *Magic: The Gathering* collectible model. They are similar to the implications of a particular processor chip (or other hardware parts) for digital platforms. The connection between the manufacturing process and ordinality also allows players and resellers to predict the odds of particular cards being in booster packs (which have semi-randomized contents) based on their knowledge of the printing process and then establish the market prices.

17. There is one exception to this rule: Some cards flip from one side to another, representing two things. For instance, a day and night cycle for werewolf creatures. Such double-sided cards are either covered in non-transparent sleeves or substituted by a dedicated placeholder card for play in un-sleeved playable decks.

THE SOFTWARE LAYER

The software level is best understood from a historical perspective which shows the "multiple potential pathways, technological dead ends, lost histories, circuitous routes, and alternative conceptions," of media history.[18] In the case of *Magic*, this means new rules, errata and formats. Initially, the lead designer Richard Garfield conceived it as a trading card game where players would gamble for cards from their own decks.[19] This rule was problematic for legal reasons – *Magic: The Gathering* was considered gambling in some parts of the US. Also, some players did not want to part with their most valuable cards after a lost duel. This rule was later abandoned when *Magic: The Gathering* moved from the trading card format to a more collectible one, but it still remains a historical evidence of design dead ends developers experimented with in the 1990s.

18. Apperley and Parikka, p. 4.
19. Richard Garfield. "The Design Evolution of Magic: The Gathering." Game Design Workshop: A Playcentric Approach to Creating Innovative Games. Eds. Tracy Fullerton, Christopher Swain and Steven Hoffman, 2nd ed., Amsterdam, Boston: Elsevier Morgan Kaufmann, 2008, pp.191-202.

117.5. Some costs are represented by {0}, or are reduced to {0}. The action necessary for a player to pay such a cost is the player's acknowledgment that he or she is paying it. Even though such a cost requires no resources, it's not automatically paid.

117.5a A spell whose mana cost is {0} must still be cast the same way as one with a cost greater than zero; it won't cast itself automatically. The same is true for an activated ability whose cost is {0}.

117.6. Some mana costs contain no mana symbols. This represents an *unpayable cost.* An ability can also have an unpayable cost if its cost is based on the mana cost of an object with no mana cost. Attempting to cast a spell or activate an ability that has an unpayable cost is a legal action. However, attempting to pay an unpayable cost is an illegal action.

117.6a If an unpayable cost is increased by an effect or an additional cost is imposed, the cost is still unpayable. If an alternative cost is applied to an unpayable cost, including an effect that allows a player to cast a spell without paying its mana cost, the alternative cost may be paid.

117.7. What a player actually needs to do to pay a cost may be changed or reduced by effects. If the mana component of a cost is reduced to nothing by cost reduction effects, it's considered to be {0}. Paying a cost changed or reduced by an effect counts as paying the original cost.

117.7a If a cost is reduced by an amount of colored mana, but its colored mana component doesn't contain mana of that color, the cost is reduced by that amount of generic mana.

117.7b If a cost is reduced by an amount of colored mana that exceeds its mana component of that color, the cost's mana component of that color is reduced to nothing and the cost's generic mana component is reduced by the difference.

117.7c If a cost is reduced by an amount of mana represented by a hybrid mana symbol, the player paying that cost chooses one half of that symbol at the time the cost reduction is applied (see rule 601.2e). If a colored half is chosen, the cost is reduced by one mana of that color. If a colorless half is chosen, the cost is reduced by an amount of generic mana equal to that half's number.

117.7d If a cost is reduced by an amount of mana represented by a Phyrexian mana symbol, the cost is reduced by one mana of that symbol's color.

A screen-cap of M:TG's comprehensive rules. http://media.wizards.com/images/magic/tcg/resources/rules/MagicCompRules_20140201.pdf

In the early history of the game, developers also tried to add more physical and spatial interactions into gameplay. For example, the card Chaos Orb could destroy anything it fell on: "Flip Chaos Orb onto the playing area from a height of at least one foot. Chaos Orb must turn completely over at least once or it is discarded with no effect. When Chaos Orb lands, any cards in play that it touches are destroyed, as is Chaos Orb." Such interactions caused complications for the players regarding the layout of play area and they also introduced inequality between players at differing levels of motor ability. All physical and spatial cards are now banned from the official

formats, but they still serve as an evidence of experimentation with the materiality of *Magic*. The current official rules have minimal spatial interactions barring some basic limitations on game zones. These developments show how the software level is greatly influenced by other elements of the platform and has over time focused on the most essential game mechanics and abandoned interactions that might dilute the main gameplay experience.[20]

While in the beginning Garfield was against the strict codification of rules, the increasing interest in the game and arising competitive scene[21] made it a necessity. At that time, different formats in which you can play *Magic*, started to emerge. Usually formats differ by card pool limitations, for example Standard allows only cards from the most recent sets, while Vintage offers nearly the complete card pool of *Magic*. Along the way, players themselves started creating their own formats and even more actively influencing the life of the game. Wizards of the Coast, publishers of the game, have embraced some of these community formats by releasing cards made especially for such formats. The popular Commander format has been receiving yearly expansions since 2011 when the first official Commander pre-constructed decks were released. Many of these emergent formats address the more controversial aspects of the official and sanctioned *Magic* formats, for example the rather high barrier of entry for new players and the high level of competitiveness. The aforementioned Commander started as a casual multi-player format and introduced a few new rules[22] including the new "commander legendary creature" rule or expanding the deck size from 60 cards to 100 cards. Overall,

20. Dexterity cards could also pose problems for the digital versions of Magic: The Gathering.
21. The first notable official tournament (World Championship) took place at the Gen Con 1994 in Milwaukee. The highest level of the competitive play – so-called Pro Tour – started in 1996; see David-Marshall, Brian. "An Oral History of the First Pro Tour." MAGIC: THE GATHERING, February 2, 2016. http://magic.wizards.com/en/articles/archive/ways-play/oral-history-first-pro-tour-2016-02-02.
22. See the official page of the independent rules committee of the format: http://mtgcommander.net/rules.php

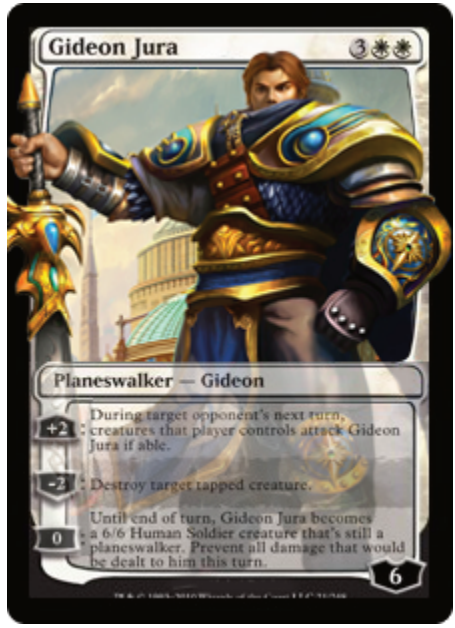
Magic can be played in many variations. These variations make it at least a very complex system of games—one which functionally resembles the interaction between the hardware and software layers of video game platforms.

THE CULTURE LAYER

Although *Magic: The Gathering* is highly commercialized, its players often engage in community building and other fannish activities. In an early ethnographic study on *Magic: The Gathering*, Patrick Kinkade and Michael Katovich have stated that it "belongs to a group of gaming cultures that rely on emergent rules, cooperative associations, and fantasy theme constructions."[23] Furthermore they argued that "the play is not necessarily the thing" pointing to the importance of participating in the overall culture of *Magic: The Gathering*. The communities around the game create a rich landscape of hobby practices. Some communities maintain unofficial formats through regular updates of rules and a banlist[24] whenever new sets are released or when particular metagames converge around a small number of extremely efficient decks. For example, the official banlist for the Commander variant is under control of a committee independent from the publisher,[25] but respected nonetheless. As mentioned before, the interactions between players and developers often follow the logic of cultural convergence[26] with popular community formats receiving official expansions. Creation of such community formats and their consequent commercialization by publishers can also be seen as a manifestation of fan labor in which

23. Patrick T. Kinkade and Michael A. Katovich. "Beyond Place: On Being a Regular in an Ethereal Culture." Journal of Contemporary Ethnography 38.1 (February 1, 2009): pp. 3–24.
24. A list of cards banned in a particular Magic: The Gathering format.
25. See http://magic.wizards.com/en/gameinfo/gameplay/formats/commander.
26. Henry Jenkins. Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide. New York: New York University Press, 2006.

fans create value which is later capitalized on by the official producers.[27] Despite the significant degree of commercialization caused by the collectible nature of the game, traces of fannish gift culture economies[28] can still be found among player communities, including various forums and sites which offer deckbuilding advice for free or share alternative card art for the casual formats.



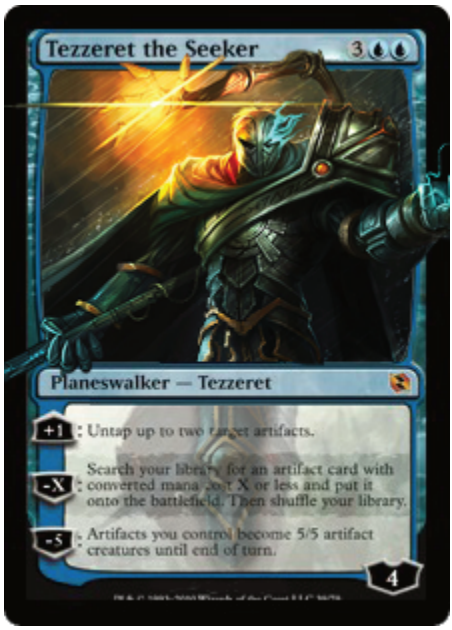
An example of alter art in Magic. Note how the image has been extended by a second artist beyond the card's borders. Image by Roooommmmelllll @deviantart CC BY-ND.

The usual conflicts between fan communities and copyright holders also emerge around *Magic*. Aaron Trammell[29] has documented and

27. Mel Standfill and Megan Condis. "Fandom And/as Labor." Transformative Works and Cultures, no. 15 (2014).
28. See Paul Booth. Digital Fandom: New Media Studies. Digital Formations, v. 68. New York: Peter Lang, 2010. Karen Hellekson. "A Fannish Field of Value: Online Fan Gift Culture." Cinema Journal 48, no. 4 (2009): 113-18.
29. Trammell, 2013.

analyzed the complicated and often confusing area of alter art[30] which mirrors the vague legal regulation of transformative cultures[31] more broadly. The popularity of the game presents many opportunities for fans, artists and players to make money out of their hobby. Furthermore, a large part of the *Magic: The Gathering* platform is directly influenced by card resellers due to their impact not only on individual card prices, but also on the prices of official pre-constructed decks which rarely follow the manufacturer's suggested retail price (MSRP) but are instead sold at prices derived from the value of cards within. Wizards of the Coast is apparently aware of the status of *Magic* as a potential investment. They curate a list of cards which will never be reprinted in an effort to secure their future price for collectors.[32]

30. Modification of the original artwork on a Magic: The Gathering card.
31. Aaron Schwabach. Fan Fiction and Copyright: Outsider Works and Intellectual Property Protection. Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2013.
32. See here for more information: http://mtgsalvation.gamepedia.com/Reserved_List.



More alter art. Image by Roooommmmelllll @deviantart CC BY-ND.

Another lucrative area enabled by *Magic: The Gathering* is the peripherals business which includes protective materials such as deck boxes, sleeves, play mats or card albums. The relatively high price for cards motivates players to protect their investment in the game by buying protection for their cards. These business practices are very similar to markets of video game platform peripherals including the distinction between unofficial, licensed and fan-made ancillary products.

ANALOG GAMES AND PLATFORM STUDIES

The structural logic of platform studies has both benefits and limits. In this essay, it has yielded an interesting and rigorous analysis of *Magic*. It has also enabled a legible comparison of analog and digital games. These analytics have their limits however, as the computational

essentialism of platform studies has in many ways diminished the conversation around *Magic* and culture. The player and industry practices which comprise most of the game appear here isolated from the game's more technical aspects.

New questions emerge: should platform studies (with its focus on the technological) be applied to new domains of of game studies? For me, the benefits of studying *Magic* as a platform outweigh the limitations. Above all, the platform framework is able to address the existence of multiple formats (both official and community-created) of *Magic: The Gathering* which would be very hard to account for if it was seen as a singular game or a part of a greater platform of playing cards. Also, the materiality emphasized by proponents of platform studies plays an important role in the collectible card game. However, the cultural aspects of the game are intrinsically tied to the other elements of the platform showing complex interactions that take place across the platform as a whole, such as the practices of alter art, secondary markets, metagame discussions or the processes of convergence between community formats and official card products.

It is important to expand the horizon of the platform studies framework and confront the rarely questioned fundamentals of game studies which often prioritize digital games and their computational layers without thorough comparison to their analog counterparts. Nonetheless, new strategies for dealing with the computational essentialism of platform studies are needed as we begin to extend the framework into the domain of analog games.