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[Cntrl] + [Alt] + [Esc] ? Virtual Platforms as Spaces of Control and Contestation

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Markets, Globalization & Development Review

[Cntrl] + [Alt] + [Esc] ? Virtual Platforms as Spaces of Control and Contestation

Introduction

In the final years of the first decade of 21st century, critical scholars — inspired by the liberating potentials of the digital revolution of the previous decades, but also concerned with rollback and perversion of liberties — had been problematizing the emerging domination of giant social media networks as the “Hausmannization of the internet” (Niederer 2008). This is a reference to Hausmann’s urban design, which, following the defeat of the Paris Commune in 1871, transformed major European capitals into modern domains of social control by replacing the intricate web of medieval streets with centralized avenues (Benjamin 1969). A decade later, we realize that, this passage from the fragmented, decentered, heterotopic virtual spaces of the early internet to the confined, monolithic, social media malls had only been the precursor of a new economic form. Today, while appearing merely as large scale digital infrastructures that act as intermediaries between their ‘users’, platforms in fact radically transform the production and distribution of products and services by creating extensive, composite and often monopolistic virtual markets (Morozov 2015). The production plants of the platform operators are as virtual as the marketplaces they create. Their concrete administrative facilities are often exaggerated statements to showcase their brand identities, whereas their real capital is the data, the algorithm, and the interface. Their wealth and power inheres in the mass of user-generated data they possess, their massive capacity to organize and process such data, and the operational knowledge they generate out of the data and invest into mediating the exchanges between customers, advertisers, service providers, producers, suppliers, and physical products (Srnicsek 2016, p. 43).

Today, *platform capitalism* asserts a complex regime of economic and social control over corporeality (Srnicsek 2016). Such control is exercised through composite virtual environments composed of intertwined components such as social media outlets, massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMPRG’s) and game worlds, application markets, personal communication applications, news and entertainment media channels, shopping services and business exchange facilities, and even voice-activated domestic assistants. While Google, Apple, Microsoft, Alibaba, Amazon, Uber, Facebook and a few others already dominate such composite virtual markets, the notion of ‘platform’

itself becomes an economic modality, way beyond a business model, for the foreseeable future.

In this special issue of MGDR, we investigate cultural, economic and political aspects of the virtual environments under platform capitalism in a broader perspective.

Articles in this Issue

Logan Brown's "The Unfree Space of Play: Emergence and Control in the Videogame and the Platform" (Brown 2018) discusses the link between the governing logic of the game as a medium and that of the platform as an economic model. Videogames as well as platforms are designed to accommodate and incorporate what Brown calls 'emergent behavior' and appear as 'free spaces' of play or social interaction. 'Emergent behaviors' are the unforeseeable actions the 'users' and 'gamers' take by reconfiguring the tools and affordances already inscribed in these virtual environments, which provide the users/gamers with a sense of agency, initiative, and freedom that make the virtual space more appealing to them. Yet, on the other hand, both forms rely on tightly controlling the actions of their users and orchestrating their virtual interactions towards the directions predetermined by the commercial goals of the virtual establishment. For Brown, videogames and platforms are technological twins that share the same governmental logic in this sense; tightly controlling the social subject without limiting 'it' — on the contrary, by incentivizing it to 'do more'. In the management of the sustained tension between social control and freedom, through a theoretically rich discussion drawing from contemporary political theory and games studies literature, Brown locates the governmental logic that permeates through the virtualities of platform capitalism to mold an advanced form of 'society of control' (Deleuze 1992).

In "Convergence markets: virtual [corpo]reality" Tracy Harwood, Tony Garry and Russell Belk investigate another dimension of how embodied virtual experiences are transferred into corporeal life (Harwood, Garry and Belk 2018). They evaluate the 'emergent behavior' Brown discusses in a political context from a critical marketing perspective, and reflect on the cultural context of videogames by examining the impact of their embodiment on various agencies involved in gaming (Brown 2018). By drawing on examples from machinima (cinematic narratives constructed by computer game graphics) culture, they inquire into the effects of the multi-sensory embodiment experiences offered by gaming platforms. Game players become co-creators of consumption experiences through their avatars, and engage in emergent behaviors that are not

originally inscribed in the design of the game. Embodiment provides the players with affordances to create rich social experiences beyond the original gaming context, which ultimately results in the convergence of virtual and corporeal life. Through a comprehensive analysis of machinima culture, the authors identify a historical transformation from embodiment of the games towards 'virtual corporeality'. Harwood, Garry and Belk analyze this transformation in four historical phases. The first phase is the emergence of game embodiment during 1996-2000. The authors call the second phase – that lasted until 2008 – the 'artistic embodiment', and argue that in this phase embodied gaming practices evolve into artistic endeavors. In the third phase, spanning 2009 to 2015, these artistic endeavors gain professional and semi-professional qualities. The transformation evolves into what they call 'virtual corpo[reality]' after 2015. In this fourth and current phase, the co-created content became an exploited social asset through monetization and commercialization. The authors argue that in the virtual corporeality phase of the transformation, technology makes it possible to actively embody all forms of virtual content (not only game content) in real-time. In their concluding comments, Harwood, Garry and Belk emphasize need for a further investigation of the impacts of such corporeal embodiment in the newly converging market contexts of game and media platforms.

Yet, the dungeons of virtual worlds are even more complex than the burrows of a molehill (Deleuze 1992). Kai Baldwin, in his "Virtual Avatars: Trans Experiences of Ideal Selves through Gaming", covertly responds to Deleuze's inquiry about the possibilities of developing new forms of resistance against the societies of control (Baldwin 2018). In his article, Baldwin discusses the potentials of the immersive virtual environments of the game worlds for experimenting with and constructing alternative gender identities. Through an ingeniously designed and executed ethnographic research conducted in MMORPG (massively multiplayer online role playing game) environments, Baldwin focuses on trans and non-binary gender identity construction and performance in virtual spaces. His research shows that these virtual spaces provide the transgender individuals (who often find themselves marginalized in corporeal public spaces) with a relatively safe space to experiment with and affirm the visibly recognizable aspects of their gender identity by customizing the avatars they embody according to their ideal selves. Moreover, Baldwin argues, the affirmation of their identities in virtual spaces as such is eventually transferred to the transgender individuals' corporeal lives, and help them overcome the dysphoria caused by the mismatch between their gender identity and corporeal physical characteristics. In this respect,

Baldwin's research offers a significant empirical contribution to the queer theory literature that it is grounded in.

Jacob Almaguer's "Gamer Resistance to Marketization of Play" is another article in this issue that focuses on the grassroots alternative cultural practices that challenge the exploitative marketing strategies of gaming platforms. In this article, Almaguer evaluates the tension between modding communities (gamers and programmers who modify and customize the programming of game interfaces) and the videogame industry, and gaming communities' reaction to further commercialization of gameplay through microtransactions (marketing of missing or extra gameplay elements within the game). Almaguer argues that modding is a communal creative practice that exceeds beyond the emergent gameplay, as "modders create their own rules" (Almaguer 2018, p. 8), and explains how the game industry's attempts to commercialize and profit from such creative practice has been challenged and largely rejected by gamer communities. For Almaguer, virtual play worlds are also spaces of a corporeal contestation between the hegemony of a profit driven industry and the collective intelligence of gaming communities, between the proprietary and the common.

In my co-authored commentary with Andreas Treske, we shift our focus to another virtual domain, that of narratives, and discuss the effects of streaming media platforms on 'audience activities' and 'narrative forms'. We point to the new thrust the traditional narrative forms (such as serials, films, documentaries) receive in the age of streaming media, when the news and other type of live programming is left to online news outlets and traditional TV channels. We argue that, streaming media, as a technological form, radically alter the spatial and temporal conditions of audience activity, introduce a new flow that we can tentatively call 'microcasting', and fragment and individualize the viewership to the degree that the 'collective' reference of the term 'audience' loses its meaning. We associate the hyperdiegetic narratives (stories interlinked to each other with shared characters, plots, or other narrative devices) on streaming media platforms (such as Marvel's Netflix franchises) with this transformed audience activity. Although such streaming media shows made for binge-watching sustain the traditional narrative structures and devices, their hyperdiegetic threads enable them to consolidate a variety of traditionally different genres within the same 'narrative universe'. Streaming media platforms, such as Netflix, appear to us as virtual shopping malls of narratives, capable of capturing every member of such atomized audience (see also the expanded view of 'transmedia, in Dholakia, Reyes and Kerrigan 2018).

Reviews in this Issue

In this special issue we selected two recent publications, and a recent film for reviewing because of their relevancy to the issues concerned in the articles.

Zoila Zombrano (2018) offers us a comprehensive review of Banerjee, Dholakia and Dholakia's book *M-Powering Marketing in a Mobile World* (2018), which discusses the economic, cultural, social, and political complexities associated with the rapid growth of mobile technologies at global scale. According to Zombrano, Banerjee, Dholakia and Dholakia's book is a valuable source for academics working in the field of marketing, since it provides us with a powerful conceptual framework of the mobile revolution and analyzes global impacts this technological leap in detail. Zombrano maintains that, Banerjee, Dholakia and Dholakia's work is also a highly relevant source for business professionals and policymakers, since it presents certain innovative mobile marketing strategies and business opportunities, as well as discussing the public policy implications of privacy and security challenges associated with global consumers at great length.

Batuhan Keskin's review of Van Dijck, Poell and de Waal's book *The Platform Society: Public Values in a Connective World* (2018) introduces us to one of the most extensive analyses of platform capitalism since Nick Srnicek's relatively recent diagnosis of this economic form. In his review, Keskin particularly highlights Van Dijck, Poell and de Waal's discussion of platform capitalism as an 'ecosystem' composed of 'infrastructural' and 'sectoral' platforms. The review essay focuses on the book's identification of three main operational mechanisms common to all platforms — datafication, commodification and selection — and their relevant problematization of public good, fairness, social responsibility and democratic control under the social and economic conditions brought by such economic form.

Siamak Javadi's film review analyzes Aneesh Chaganty's debut feature, *Searching* (2018). This film review shares Van Dijck, Poell and de Waal's concerns about public life in the context social media platforms in the film. Javadi posits Chaganty's film as an artful as well as thoughtful reflection on the cultural and socio-political implications of the social media platforms. For Javadi, Chaganty's film is a sophisticated text which can be read in the light of Herman and Chomsky's criticism of 'propaganda model' (1988); social media platforms can manipulate and limit public debate and deliberation, while providing outlets for easy access to information.

Concluding Observations

“[Cntrl] + [Alt] + [Esc]” is a keyboard shortcut combination in Linux operating systems (simultaneous pressing of control, alt and escape buttons on the keyboard), which executes “*force quit*”, “*restart*”, or “*switch system controls directly*” commands depending on the Linux distribution. We think it poetically represents the spirit enveloping the small collection of articles and reviews in this issue. These works provide us with certain entry points about evaluating how virtual platforms dispose our everyday social relations and corporeal lives in certain ways today. It is not surprising that videogames and game culture/industry become the entry point for most of these articles in approaching the multifaceted compound of platform capitalism. As Brown identifies (Brown 2018), videogames are not only technological twins of the platforms as interactive media, but they share the same governmental logic as controlled virtual spaces. It is no wonder that today we are seeing ‘gamification’ as an open, legitimate, and productive strategy in increasing the economic efficiency of various platforms (see, Mason 2018).

Despite having different foci, these articles and reviews all critically problematize this new economic modality before us, and openly or inevitably invoke the question, “what is to be done?”. Previous scholars, with analytical takes on the subject, point to the fact that ‘platform’ is not an economic model that inevitably emerges at the current state of technological development, as a logical extension and formal expression of ‘digital media technologies’ (Srnicek 2016; Van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal 2018). On the contrary, this is an economic modality that emerge as a consequence of decades-long political investments, economic conditions, and public policies. Although, as Keskin (2018) concludes, these technological, political and economic conditions, at the moment, make the platforms more advantaged in sustaining their domination in the face of growing public resentment in many fronts, we hope this small collection of articles will contribute to a bigger contestation and newer directions.

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