How Can an Unfinished Multiplayer Networking Scheme Produce Pleasure? XBAND as an Affective Infrastructure

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INTRODUCTION: HOW SHOULD WE UNDERSTAND XBAND AS A "MINOR PLATFORM"?

Late-twentieth-century console networking systems are usually framed as failed preludes to platforms such as Xbox Live and PlayStation Network—a teleology that flattens the pre-platform era's experimentalism. Drawing on media archaeology, especially Nicoll's (2019) "minor platforms" and Guins's (2014) social lives of game hardware, this paper revisits XBAND (1994, stylized as XB∀ND), a short-lived third-party modem peripheral for the SNES and Sega Genesis. Its central move is a shift in the unit of analysis: XBAND's pleasures lay not in the game interface but in players' relation to the infrastructure itself—building, maintaining, gaming, awaiting, and breaking it. Before platformization black-boxed users into passive endpoints, networked play formed what, after Berlant (2016, 2022), I call an affective infrastructure: attachment arose because the system was unfinished, visible, and breakable. Framed as a "vernacular networking imaginary" (Jasanoff and Kim 2015) continuous with the amateur "modem world" before the commercial Internet (Driscoll 2022), it launched on 17 November 1994 in five U.S. markets (New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Dallas, Atlanta) and later reached Japan (Super Famicom and Saturn) and Brazil (TecToy's Mega Net 2). Catapult merged with Mpath in 1996, and the 16-bit service closed on 30 April 1997 with fewer than 7,000 paying subscribers. But it seems never to have been forgotten; instead, it has been repeatedly remembered and revisited by players across retro hardware communities and gaming forums. Why embrace such a costly, fragile system? The answer oscillates between Berlant's (2011) "cruel optimism" and her later "affective infrastructure".

SPLICING AND ILLICIT ENGINEERING AS TECHNICAL PLEASURE

XBAND's pleasures were first those of opening a black box: a team recruited to "hack games" treated the console as re-openable. An onboard ASIC (patented as a "video

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game enhancer"), continuous with the Game Genie, intercepted the cartridge and rerouted second-controller reads to remote modem input—so online play descended from the hack, not the platform. Lacking first-party platform certification, programmers reverse-engineered titles one by one, loading a game-specific patch into the modem's SRAM and re-opened a closed system creatively (Hertz and Parikka 2012). Such labor hid beneath a rhetoric of seamless ease ("just a cartridge and a phone line")—an early rehearsal of the smoothing Gillespie (2010) finds in the word "platform." Yet players boasted not of a frictionless surface but of the complication itself: possessing an infrastructure others could not.

AN UNFINISHED INFRASTRUCTURE: AN ALTERNATIVE TOPOLOGY

XBAND was neither centralized nor fully peer-to-peer but hybrid: players dialed Catapult's server for authentication, patching, and matchmaking, after which the match ran over a direct modem-to-modem call. Low-level control of deliberately cheap 2400-baud modems suppressed compression to reach two-to-three frames of delay (Ashley 2005). Through Galloway (2004), this centre/edge split is an abandoned proposal for network governance; through Ernst (2013), frame-by-frame delay management wrests a fragile "real time" from a network not built for it. Because infrastructure is relational and often temporary (Plantin et al. 2018), XBAND was a provisional test site, rebuilt as its host consoles aged. After Gillespie (2010) and Helmond (2015) it was an "unfinished platform"—platformization's gestures without its industrial ecosystem—and that incompleteness is what makes its relations visible.

FABRICATING NETWORKED SOCIALITY

Connection was only the first step; XBAND self-consciously fabricated a social world via avatars, a Player List tracking wins, losses, and last-played dates, cross-media X-Mail, in-system periodicals (BANDWIDTH, XBAND News), and a Chess-Federation-style Elo ranking system. It even staged "Cybersports" events: the 1995 Madden NFL 96 XBAND Challenge drew over 2,500 players competing for a Super Bowl trip. These are platformization's gestures (Helmond 2015), but their shape was local: matchmaking was bound to telephone economics (free local calls, paid long distance), so the service launched in only five markets and depended on local critical mass. XBAND therefore built telephone-bounded local publics—closer to Driscoll's (2022) "modem world" of interconnected communities than to a global village. This apparatus of reputation and "realness" is what made a win or a ranking matter.

AFFECTIVE INFRASTRUCTURE: FRAGILITY AS A CONDITION OF ATTACHMENT

XBAND proved difficult to sustain during its brief lifespan because of the compounded fragility of infrastructure, business model, and community governance. Household phone lines, parental controls, and long-distance charges excluded many children from the system altogether, while the prevalence of "droppers" and the inadequacy of official governance left many ordinary paying players frustrated. Yet these very frictions also functioned as a mechanism of selection, making the world feel real and tangible to those who remained inside it. An exclusive scene emerged as a result: marketing promised that there were only "two kinds of people on XBAND: gunslingers and dead men." Rather than becoming an open network that broadly accommodated all players, the XBAND community increasingly took shape as an elite "club" of skilled

players, admitting only those who had proven themselves through loyalty, win records, and the ability to stay connected. Here, friction itself produced subcultural capital (Thornton 1995). Had XBAND been as seamless as its advertisements promised, this sense of belonging might have dissolved. In this sense, XBAND hovered between cruel optimism and affective infrastructure; the two were not opposed, for an infrastructure can be built from scratch precisely because it mobilizes and sustains complex forms of imagination, desire, and affective investment.

CONCLUSION: RECONSTRUCTING A PRE-PLATFORM POSSIBILITY HORIZON

With later systems such as Sega NetLink (1996), XBAND yields a nonlinear history of multiplayer infrastructure. The contribution is threefold: theoretically, it joins affect theory, infrastructure studies, and media archaeology to relocate game pleasure from the interface to the infrastructural relation; empirically, it offers a counter-case to platformization, in which players were the infrastructure's co-producers rather than passive endpoints; methodologically, it treats fragility as a resource, since breakdown is when an infrastructure—and the attachments it sustains—become visible. Recovering this horizon reframes subjectivity, attachment, and technical pleasure under today's platformization.

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