

Piracy & Media Studies

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In November of 2005, Bloomberg Businessweek published an article titled, “Attack of the PlayStation Hackers.” The story revolved around one gaming enthusiast’s discovery that Sony’s new handheld console, PlayStation Portable, lacked a certain security measure on its firmware that prevents its users from running unsigned code. As a result, hackers flocked to the device, using clever software exploits to turn the consoles into general-purpose computers that could do any number of things other than gaming. With homebrew, a PSP wasn’t just a PSP anymore—it was a remote control to a Sony robot dog, a way to watch TV shows and movies ripped from DVDs, a place to run bootleg copies of games, and even a platform from which to print photos.

I offer PSP homebrew and other appliance hacking practices like iOS jailbreaking and Android rooting as case studies for a quasi-piratical practice known as “privilege escalation,” defined as, “the act of exploiting a bug, design flaw or configuration oversight in an operating system or software application to gain elevated access to resources that are normally protected from an application or user.”¹ This kind of unsanctioned participation in the evolution or improvement of computers lies at a legal precipice and thus challenges the boundaries between formal and informal networks in regards to technological progress and development. While it is legally decried as piratical, console hacking is intimately tied to what constitutes mainstream, legitimized versions of product development—at times even aiding the creation of more secure and efficient systems. For instance, while custom firmware “patches” by amateur programmers open up spaces for piratical activity, they also unintentionally aid the improvement of official technologies by directing attention to security flaws. Meanwhile, an official security patch is

ironically one of the root causes of piracy as it attracts more homebrewers who rise to the challenge of finding new exploits. Given this intersectionality, I would like to consider a boundary between the pirate and the sovereign that is not so much a question of access, but rather one of temporal continuity and spin.

Alexander Galloway speaks of the reticular fallacy—the false idea that rhizomatic structures lack sovereign control and that control itself merely denotes centralization.² Indeed, the nature of control in the PSP network is not necessarily one of centralization, but rather it involves working through monetization, branding, and rhetoric in order to determine what kinds of practices are excluded or deemed dangerous. For instance, the term “upgrade” is kept as a term for evolution through the death of old technologies and the tempered, conservative release of new technologies. Yet, the word’s deployment is often fraught with contradiction. Informal homebrew development and formal software updates are both defined as “upgrades” by whichever party is making the changes. In one PS3 case, third party developers “upgraded” their consoles by essentially “downgrading” from a previous PS3 “upgrade,” which was itself a “downgrade” from the original version. In the world of PlayStation, this spiralling patchwork of modification becomes engine that drives technological change. Ultimately, as is clear in the back and forth exchanges of PSP homebrew and official updates, the concept of a linear technological progress as it is conceived by mass producing entities is prescriptive and political.

This is where “privilege escalation” becomes problematic as a catch-all term for practices that include iOS jailbreaking, Android rooting, and console hacking. “Escalation” has war-like connotations for both uncontrollable life, military attack, and hypertrophy—the pushing of a technology to a state “further than it is meant to go.”³ Escalation encompasses a certain biopolitical fear of multidirectional proliferation and additionally invokes a security threat—

something that is particularly salient if we consider what Bhaskar Sarkar describes as a bleeding between the war on piracy and the war on terror.⁴ Regardless of how much transformation is actually involved, acts of privilege escalation, particularly those that have ties to the piratical sphere, immediately conjure up images of violence and monstrosity. Meanwhile, despite the fact that consumers are regularly forced to adopt firmware updates and thus render older versions obsolete at an ever-increasing pace, this forward development is not seen as a radical or escalating process. Rather, as Laikwan Pang explains, “although newness is celebrated, it cannot be radical, but must fit into a teleology of progression, so that creativity, already conditioned by the logic of innovation, is always already epistemological.”⁵ In this network, sovereign control manifests as the dictation of narrative in relation to temporality, where the only acceptable movement is the singular propulsion of progress and obsolescence, despite an understated reliance on alternative modalities.

¹ “Privilege Escalation.” *Wikipedia*, last modified August 19, 2014.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Privilege_escalation

² Alexander R. Galloway, “The Reticular Fallacy.” *Boundary 2*, December 17, 2014. Accessed December 18, 2014. <http://boundary2.org/2014/12/17/the-reticular-fallacy/>

³ Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker, *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 98.

⁴ Bhaskar Sarkar, “Media Piracy and the Terrorist Boogeyman: Speculative Potentiations.” 8-9.

⁵ Laikwan Pang. *Creativity and its discontents: China’s creative industries and intellectual property rights offenses*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 39.