Games, Locative and Mobile Media

INTRODUCTION

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The French writer Georges Perec once asked why it was that, ‘we always need to know what time it is […] but we never ask ourselves where we are’ (1999: 83). For Perec, this was, in fact, a rhetorical question. His assertion is that even when we provide an answer to this question — ‘we are at home, at our office, in the Métro, in the street’ (83) — we only really ‘think we know’, and the answer betrays how very little we in fact do know about our location, because the “where” of “somewhere” is tied up with the seemingly inscrutable workings of the everyday.

The impact of mobile media on the situation that Perec describes is rather ambiguous. On the one hand, the issue of where one is would appear to be of minimal concern to many mobile users. For instance, recent psychological research found that ‘people talking on cell phones are more than twice as oblivious to their surroundings as those not on the phone’ (Widman, 2009).

On the other hand, the rise of mobile and, especially, locative media, as is argued here in this issue of Second Nature and elsewhere (Lloyd, et al., 2009; Wilken, 2005, 2008), would appear to have altered this situation by forcing us to reflect more fully on our apprehension and comprehension of the places and spaces we encounter, move through, and inhabit. One of the more obvious and routine examples that can be cited as illustration of this is the prevalence of the question, “where are you?”, by which so many mobile phone conversations begin (Laurier, 2001). And yet, as Arminen quite rightly points out, ‘pure geographical location is rarely of users’ [or researchers’] interest’ (2006: 322). The fact that mobile media refocus our attention on where we are is not necessarily noteworthy in and of itself, rather it is significant for the raft of further questions it opens up for contemplation and debate. How does mobile and locative gaming impact upon notions and experiences of play, place and mobility? How does labour, and especially the notion of “immaterial labour”, operate in relation to (and become enfolded into) our embrace and consumption of mobile media, particularly mobile gaming? What are the forms of “presence” that are particular to locative and other forms of mobile media? And what of the corporeal; what are the kinds of body-technology and body-place relations expected of and prompted by gaming, locative, and mobile media?

This special themed section of Second Nature is concerned with responding to and stimulating discussion around the above and related questions. In particular, it seeks to explore the variety of ways that, from location-aware gaming (using GPS) to casual games accessed on the mobile phone, the arena of mobile gaming is becoming increasingly widespread in contemporary culture, dynamically redefining perceptions of mobility, place, play (and work), and embodiment. All of the articles in this themed section deal with one or more of this confluence of factors.

The themed section opens with an agenda-setting introductory article by Katie Salen which elaborates on a number of key issues that motivate not only the papers collected in this issue, but mobile gaming development and research more broadly. Salen reflects on both present uses and possible futures of mobile gaming. Her argument is that paying due attention to these future uses is particularly important if we are to understand both how ‘mobile play comes to be embedded in society’, and how play in general becomes ‘a force shaping the very imagining of the mobile society itself’.
This argument is then further developed by considering how play is worked out in relation to the four different categories or questions game designer Richard Garfield identifies as crucial to our experience of any digital game. These are: what a player brings to a game; what a player takes away from a game; what happens between games, and, what happens during a game, other than the game itself. Salen’s conclusion—or, more accurately, her vision of truly ‘playful futures’—is one where the ‘reconciliatory function of games and play’ is emphasised. By this she means that mobile platforms have the potential to enable a ‘stitching together’ of ‘experiences held across time, space, communities and bodies’.

The second article, by Ingrid Richardson and Rowan Wilken, develops an analysis of the relation between pedestrian mobility and the use of mobile devices. Drawing on ideas of “post-phenomenology” and “tactile” or “haptic vision”, the article outlines a “peripatetic phenomenology” that can usefully interpret the embodied micro- and macro-practices of “walking in the city” in present-day contexts. Using the Japanese-based location-aware mobile game Magi as a case study, and drawing on a relational and hybrid understanding of both space and place in public urban environments, we argue that locative games such as Magi invoke a particular body-place relation and “peripatetic modality” that carries important implications for how we understand not just locative gaming but wider mobile phone use.

In the third article, Caroline Bassett develops a very personal account of her experiment in trialling brain training games. This intimate approach—which draws on George Perec’s call to pay close critical attention to the minutiae of everyday experience—is necessary, Bassett argues, in order to ‘get at certain aspects of the contemporary relationship between (the social construction of) public space and the experience of privatized individuals within that space’ and the tensions that exist between them. Bassett is also clearly attuned to the kinds of labour (or “creative production”) that is encouraged by these brain training games at the level of the privatized self. These games can clearly be seen to resonate with the kinds of arguments made by Ulrich Beck and others which frame the self as a “life project”, something that requires active engagement and is open to constant reshaping in order for us, as individuals, to become “better citizens”.

This interest in games as forms of “productive labour” is also taken up and explored at length in Bjorn Nansen’s article. Here Nansen broadens the terms of mobility from play associated with mobile devices to incorporate moving bodies associated with fixed-location “exertion gaming” devices, such as the phenomenally successful Nintendo Wii. Nansen sets out to theorise this type of “exertion gaming” as a particular modality of mobile gaming—one where the gaming body and the gaming experience is engaged through the kinaesthetic sense of movement. This, he argues, makes legible a form of momentum and motility that could be described as a kinaesthetic technicity”. Nansen then analyses the implications of this “technicity of kinaesthesia”, as he puts it, via a detailed account of three game-related contexts—gamebodies, gameplay, and gametime. In doing so, a key aim is to draw out the implications of Wii play for understandings of individualised forms of work—especially what we might call the “work of the self”. Drawing from the theories of Maurizio Lazzarato (“immaterial labour”) and Adrian MacKenzie (“affect of efficiency”), Nansen views exertion games such as Wii as “value-adding”, but according to a very particular and critical understanding of “value”, which takes ‘the form of affective labour in the production of corporeal capacities for motility within a digital and participatory media milieu’.

The final paper by media artist Troy Innocent, gives a detailed account of an urban art project, Colony, which he developed in and around the Life.lab building within the Digital Harbour precinct of the Docklands in Melbourne, Australia. This particular work draws from and further extends Innocent’s prior interest in iconographic “language” and artificial life to create a kind of mixed reality “ecosystem”. The Life.lab garden in which Colony is situated becomes its habitat and this artificial ecosystem relies on other “elements” within this habitat for its sustenance, especially people. Human interaction and stimulus is vital to the success of the system, and this occurs on a number of different levels, including through the sensing of human motion within the space, and via direct input received from an iPhone (or iPod touch). In these ways, Colony establishes a close symbiotic relationship with the people who interact with it—a process that positions Colony’s interdependent relationship with the urban art environment as crucial to its operation, and vital to the experiences and pleasures of the interacting audience.
A key aim of this special issue, as stated at the outset, was to explore the variety of ways that the arena of mobile gaming and related areas are dynamically redefining perceptions of mobility, place, play (and work), and embodiment. Gathered here are five papers that take up these issues in quite distinct but nonetheless interconnected ways. It is fortuitous that things have worked out this way, and I hope the articles in this special issue, and the insights they offer and the arguments they develop, provide a rich resource for further inquiry in this area.

Finally, some acknowledgments and thanks are due. The initial impetus for this special issue came from a series of discussions on mobiles that took place in Melbourne, Australia, in late 2008 under the auspices of the Games Locative and Mobile Media (GLAMM) node of the Australian Research Council sponsored Cultural Research Network. I am grateful to the other researchers involved in these discussions and for their generosity in sharing their expertise and for their assistance in pulling this special issue together—in particular, I thank Larissa Hjorth and Ingrid Richardson. I also wish to thank the general editor of Second Nature, Shiralee Saul, for her enthusiastic support of and assistance with this special issue. Last, but by no means least, I wish to thank the other contributing authors for entrusting me with their papers.

References

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Biography

Rowan Wilken is a lecturer in the School of Culture & Communication at The University of Melbourne, Australia. His present research is concerned with examining the interconnections between ICT use and social and spatial theory. At present, he is particularly interested in understanding how mobile media impact on and shape our engagements with urban space. He is also presently working on a book entitled Teletechnologies, Place, and Community (Routledge, forthcoming).