Dean Keep and Marsha Berry

Abstract

In this paper, we seek to explore the potential of the mobile device as a tool for creating and/or delivering narrative based content. In a world where mobile device specifications differ from model to model, old wisdoms cannot be refashioned. The narrative artefact becomes device dependant and this greatly affects the quality of the user experience.

We expose the conditions of possibility and constraints afforded by current developments in mobile phone technology. We examine the possibilities of very small screens for storytelling with a focus on the relationship of the viewer to a narrative artefact that lives in miniature. Things that fit within the hand have a special relation to us and often find a way into our hearts. In this paper we draw on the aesthetics of Western and Eastern traditions to explore ways in which these may inspire contemporary practice in mobile small screen media and miniature narratives.

Introduction

“It's the pictures that got small”, declared Norma Desmond in Billy Wilder’s 1950’s film classic “Sunset Boulevard”. Could it be that Miss Desmond was referring to the future production of miniature narratives for the mobile phone?

The proliferation of mobile devices in Australia has given rise to a growing consumer demand for services and entertainment designed for the small screen. The growing trend in consumer interest and demand for mobile content was noted as being very much a part of the fabric of everyday life in a recent review of content delivered over mobile communications devices conducted by The Australian Film Commission (AFC, 2004, p.4).

In this paper, we seek to explore the potential of the mobile device as a tool for delivering narrative based content. We pose two key questions:

What are the emerging aesthetics of the mobile phone screen?

To what extents do these miniature narratives require the author to consider a new range of parameters for the design of mobile-based media?

To address these questions we will discuss the unique challenges related to the production and display of narrative based authored content on the mobile phone. Narrative, as a cultural artefact exists within a
context thus we will also examine the user relationship with the small screen and draw comparisons with some pre-existing historical forms of narratives. In the section below we describe the evolving landscape of the mobile phone.

The evolution of the mobile phone

Paul Daly from m.Net Corporation succinctly outlined the opportunities and limitations for content providers at the Mobile Journeys seminar held in Sydney in September, 2004. He claimed that it is possible for content providers and developers to gain an early position with the networks in what is the next big thing. Mobile phones represent a new medium for content now that 3G (the third generation) has arrived. 3G allows users to send and receive rich media provided they have a 3G capable handset and network. Two technologies in the main are responsible for the evolution of high-speed wireless networks. These are GSM and CDMA2000. GSM stands for Global System for Mobile Communications and was first developed in 1991. The official site for GSM describes it thus:

GSM is a living and evolving wireless communications standard that already offers an extensive and feature-rich ‘family’ of voice and data services. The GSM family consists of today's GSM, General Packet Radio Service (GPRS), Enhanced Data rates for GSM Evolution (EDGE) and third generation GSM services (3GSM) based on the latest WCDMA technology. Together these platforms create GSM - The Wireless Evolution. (http://www.gsmworld.com/technology/index.shtml, viewed 11/05/05)

CDMA2000 is described as:

CDMA2000 is a 3G mobile telecommunications standard, one of the approved radio interfaces for the ITU's IMT-2000 standard, and a successor to 2G CDMA (IS-95, branded cdmaOne). The underlying signaling standard is known as IS-2000. CDMA2000 is an incompatible competitor of the other major 3G standard W-CDMA. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/CDMA2000, viewed 11/05/05)

The perception of the mobile phone as a simple communication device is changing as mobile phone manufacturers develop more sophisticated mobile devices. The evolution of new generation or 3G (third generation) mobile devices has enabled users to download rich media content at a time and location that is only restricted by cost and network coverage.

The production of user-generated content, such as SMS/ MMS, is driving a keen interest in mobile media that is entertaining yet at the same time accommodates the social contexts within which mobile phone use is embedded according to MGain (2003). While technical considerations such as file formats and sizes along with screen dimensions place constraints on the kinds of content that work in this new medium, these constraints also present opportunities to develop new forms and new aesthetics for new markets. Traditional narrative codes and signifiers need to be remediated to suit the emerging aesthetics of mobile media.
The mobile phone in the everyday

The convergence of new media technologies has enabled the transition to a mediated self; constantly absorbing, constructing and generating narrative forms. The mobile device becomes an integrated part of the self, influencing both our identity and social behaviour. The mobile device casts a digital lifeline to a networked universe of possibilities. To be separated from the phone, would be like losing the connection to our past, present and future.

In his paper *Towards a Sociology of the Mobile Phone*, McGuigain notes:

The spirit of the machine in our mobile age of neo-liberal globalization is not a phantasm to be wished away but deeply embedded already in routine social practices and relationships. (2005, p. 55)

The intimate nature of the user relationship with the mobile device suggests an increased assimilation with the narrative and the viewer, and this is further evidenced by the growing trend towards user-generated content. The recent advent of Podcasting and Moblogging technologies illustrates a profound shift in the way we access and create digital narratives. The user now has the power to publish or access content where and when they like, and the mobile phone becomes a tool for entertainment, interaction and lifestyle management.

The mobile phone is challenging traditional notions of the public and the private self. It is conceivable that the inception of the Webcam and the Reality T.V. program has instigated a new narrative form in which the personal and the private co-exist within the one heavily mediated space. Weibel states that:

A new market of attention produces narcissism, exhibitionism, voyeurism as new playgrounds of the mass media, in which no limits are set on the sellout of the private sphere. (2005, p. 84)

Access to a range of content that can be downloaded anywhere at any time via the mobile device provides users with a sense of constant connectivity. Each user forms part of a greater network of mobile users that are sharing information and generating content at the push of a button. The SMS message profoundly altered our socialisation and language usage in accordance to the limitations of the mobile device and generated a hybrid narrative form that acknowledges the needs and desires of the user. It has also has a profound influence on our cultural environment and how we see ourselves in relation to others. Lunenfeld (1999) analyses the degree to which mobile phones and connectivity have become integral to our everyday lived experience:
The screen engendered by the convergence of digital media with telecommunications is one where people interact and form communities, activities formerly thought to be restricted to the world. In the wake of this kind of boundary blurring, the easy denunciation of the screen as pallid simulation of "reality" ignores the validity of the pleasures and experiences people derive therein. (1999, p.196)

The small screen becomes a mirror scape reflecting our dreams and desires in the form of a miniature narrative that is stored deep within the heart of the mobile device. The phone becomes an extension of the self, allowing the exchange of narratives and blurring conventional notions of the public and the private. Plant (2002) in her paper, 'on the mobile' states that:

The mobile has taken its place in a time marked by increasing connectivity, unprecedented mobility, and the emergence of new cultures, communities and collectives, and is now helping to shape that new, emerging world. (2002, p. 77)

We believe that the creation of narrative based content for the mobile phone needs to address a need for a personal communication that acknowledges the intimate relationship between the user and the device whereby the device is a material extension of the self. Furthermore we believe that there is space for Australian content and narratives, particularly if they may be translated into other languages where markets are larger.

**Opportunities for artists and writers**

Unlike the established codes of the cinematic narrative, the mobile or miniature narrative does not yet possess a series of aesthetic rules and conventions that can aid or influence the production of mobile content. Perhaps one of the greatest challenges for artists and writers is to determine the design parameters for the mobile device. Plant (2002) observes the displacement effect that the mobile has whereby it is possible for selves to be both ‘here’ and ‘elsewhere’ at the same time:

The mobile requires its users to manage the intersection of the real present and the conversational present in a manner that is mindful of both. Many mobile users have become adept at operating as though in two worlds in these psychological senses, and in more physical ways as well: in a way the mobile has created a new mode in which the human mind can operate, a kind of bi-psyche. (Plant, 2002, p. 51)

Artists and writers are exploring the potential of the mobile device as a tool for creating and/or delivering narrative based content. The narrative artefact becomes device dependant and this greatly affects the quality of the user experience. The challenge for creators of narrative driven content is to balance viewer participation and compelling storytelling.

**Miniature Mobile Narrative Aesthetics**
The mobile device instigates an archaeology that marks a distinct paradigm shift away from conventional modes of communication, and socialisation. Due to the procedural nature of the mobile interface, a user must adopt a new dialogue that acknowledges the limitations imposed by the mobile device. The audience must now learn a new set of codes and conventions in order to successfully operate and navigate within a networked space. As we adopt the language of the machine, it is worth reflecting on the role traditional modes of storytelling will play in the production of miniature narratives for the mobile device as well as on new possibilities.

Manovich observes that:

To develop a new aesthetics for new media, we should pay as much attention to cultural history as to the computer’s unique new possibilities to generate, organize, manipulate and distribute data. (Manovich, 2002a, p. 314)

And further that:

On the level of aesthetics, the Web has established as a new communication standard the multimedia document (namely something that combines and mixes different media of text, photography, video, graphics, sound). (Manovich, 2001b, p.12)

The cultural space in which narratives can reside is central to the kinds of aesthetics that should influence narrative shapes and contours. Very small screens present challenges for design and narration. Episodic structures, the effect of time and dramatic arcs need to be thought of differently in this new media habitat. In order to theorise narrative in miniature we first need to address the role narrative forms have in this mobile public yet private space and the roles narratives have to play in the lives of the selves who inhabit these spaces. Young, a creator of interactive narratives, argues that:

New media narratives will never successfully tell stories in the manner of films or novels, but they are evolving their own conventions and techniques to tell stories of an entirely different nature. (Young, 2004, p1)

We would like to extend Young’s notion and argue that traditional forms can be transformed and remediated and that poaching from traditional established forms, conventions and media can be worthwhile enterprise in the search for a narrative aesthetic for mobile devices. Cinema, illustrated and graphic novels, haiku all have narrative forms and conventions that create potential for remediation. Stories are re-mediated across different media and strive to provide a vicarious experience for the reader/viewer as observed by Leishman (2001):
Within every reading or understanding of a narrative, there is always a certain amount of personalisation that directly relates to self-awareness and vision. We have all been shocked by the intimate similarities of characters in stories, whether it is a kinship with their emotions or situations. (Leishman, 2001)

The Persian or Iranian miniature painting is an example of a personalised narrative form that may be usefully poached and remediated for mobile phones. The history of the Persian or Central Asian miniature manuscript is rich and imbued with romance. It reached its zenith according to some commentators (eg Welch, 1976; Kainush, 1998) during the Mongol and Timurid periods between the 13th and 16th centuries. The art was associated with episodes from the Prophet Mohammed life and secular themes concerning heroic rulers and romance. The miniatures enhanced the poetic and lyrical qualities of the narration. Generally there was no attempt at realism, perspective or sense of scale. Their stories are told on a flat plane, without concern for light source, anatomy or even human emotion. The figures are iconic rather than literal representations of individuals. They use a God’s perspective whereby several events may be seen at the same time. The works should be ‘read’ from right to left and bottom to top, the reverse of Western traditions. Elements of the composition have a narrative function and their placement is a deliberate in order to create a narrative text that can be read. Kainush observes that "In the Tabriz miniatures of the period, there appeared a magnificent ability to create within a limited space, a full illusion of a particular scene or landscape; for example, a picture of a palace building, including part of its yard, inner garden and the palace interior.” It is an art form where ornamentation is integral to the narration rather than an incidental visual compositional element. Welch (1976) observes that

Perhaps the most characteristic element in Iranian painting is its use of arabesque, the rhythmic design based upon flowering vines that invigorates most Islamic art. Like a pulse, the reciprocal rhythms of this ornamental system suffuse and unify all Iranian compositions. Without it, these paintings would be as unthinkable as an orchestra playing a Bach suite without rhythm. With it, they are the visual equivalent of poetic verse. (Welch, 1976, p13)

Haiku is another traditional and personal art form that has conventions and an underlying aesthetic that may be successfully used in small screen mobile devices to create narrative content. Text can be difficult to decipher on a small screen so the economic use of words becomes a major aesthetic consideration in a similar way to Haiku where 17 syllables is the formal aesthetic convention.

The Penny Dreadful novel has an episodic structure and developed the ‘cliff hanger’ as a narrative convention that appeared in a later incarnation in film serials and the form is so familiar that it is a cliché. The structure of an episode follows a mini dramatic arc as first expounded by Aristotle containing the following plot points: exposition, inciting incident, rising action, crisis, climax, falling action and denouement. The complications in the plot occur over time. In a Penny Dreadful, the episode would end on the climax so that the reader would have to obtain the next episode to find out what happens in the denouement or resolution. We hold that Aristotle’s arc has a definite and key role in aesthetic for miniature mobile narratives. Furthermore, we propose to poach narrative devices like stock characters and readily recognisable stereotypes for a new aesthetic of the miniature mobile narrative from cinema. Indeed, early cinema writers and directors borrowed quite freely from theatre where there was an already rich tradition of stock characters and improvised action based on stock storylines and routines, such as Punch and Judy, and Poirot and Columbine. Many of the comedy routines were film versions of Commedia del Arte action sequences, for example, the Marx Brothers. Silent movie techniques with
montage and text can also inform a miniature mobile narrative aesthetic. Locked within the tiny screen, these miniature images conjure up notions of the personal and private. A new screen reality remediates and replaces the old rules that belong to the world of the cinematic experience.

Clichés present both opportunities and danger for the creation of narrative content and that while they can be very effective in a space that relies on the swift establishment of characters, setting and genre, they need to be used judiciously. Liu (2004) presents a fourfold strategy to overcome hyperarticulation, which he defines as narrative that has had the spirit taken out in order to improve economy of the representation and the efficiency of communication, in other words, clichés as a form of shorthand. It is narrative that is conceptualised to the point where there is nothing left to the imagination of the reader where there is nothing left for the reader to do. Liu (2004) poaches poststructuralist notions to create a model that protects narrative aesthetics from the tendencies to reduce them to formulas and algorithms by Hollywood screenwriters and programmers.

Barthes (1970) deftly synthesised Derrida’s urgings to escape from the bonds of the structurality of texts with Kristeva’s theories around intertextuality and how traditional narratives are reborn over and over in new forms. Intertextuality according to Liu (2004) is a way we can avoid trap of hyperarticulation because the network in between texts helps a text resist the tendency too be killed through over explanation and cliché. However, clichés may be used intertextually to create new forms with interesting juxtapositions. Thus intertextuality should be at the heart of a miniature mobile narrative aesthetic.

Unusual representation is the second way to avoid hyperarticulation. Liu states that:

By violating traditional representations for narratives as developing new representations through intuitive metaphors, a storyteller resists hyperarticulation by avoiding or defamiliarizing known forms and techniques. (2004, p 7)

This can include techniques such as blowing up photographic images to the degree where the details overwhelm the whole or telling the same event from multiple points of view. We argue that unusual representation can be usefully exploited as a guiding principle for a miniature mobile narrative aesthetic. It could be said that miniature narratives create a bridge that connects social reality and screen reality.

Liu identifies the aesthetic signature as the third strategy and defines it as: “The manner of the narrator and the unique lens they take on the world constitute aesthetic signature” (p7). The fourth strategy is personalisation and perhaps this is the most pertinent for the mobile phone as a narrative space. Liu states that “many of the nuances of a subculture or a person remain unarticulated in the cultural narrative space because the nuances are not common enough too have been articulated among the masses” (p7). As a cultural narrative space, the mobile phone ecology is one that is characterised by subcultures. For us this means that in the mobile phone narrative space there are many opportunities to create narratives that are not hyperarticulated, where intertextual references and clichés can be constructed as a narrative device and old forms such as Persian miniatures may be poached to create new personalised narratives with their own unique aesthetic signature.
**Miniature Narratives**

*rL~* is a piece written by geniwate and has a unique aesthetic signature that draws on soap opera episodic structures and the game Sims. Remediation is a key element of geniwate’s signature where she has used and remediated old forms and conventions such as ‘noir’ to create a narrative with its own unique stamp.

*Plate 1: Stills from geniwate’s *rL~*

*Velocity*, created by Keep, combines the interactivity of mobile media with the familiar conventions of genre-based cinema. The shadowy and seductive night-world pays homage to the dark visual aesthetic of film noir. The use of abrupt montage, a suspenseful soundtrack, and dramatic shock events make playful reference to the familiar codes embedded within the 1980’s horror film.

*Plate 2: Still from Keep’s *Velocity*
“The call to adventure may come in the form of a message or a messenger.” (Vogler, p.100) In the case of *Velocity*, the familiar beep that announces the arrival of a text message is the inciting incident that triggers our hero’s journey. A stalker is on the loose, but what happens when the device that could save your life is also the one that could end it? The narrative examines the socialisation of the camera phone and its impact on notions of privacy. Messages from fictional characters share the mobile device’s inbox with the viewer’s everyday communications. Suddenly the small screen is a mirror that reflects the fictional narrative and enables the viewer to inhabit the story space.

The deconstruction of cinematic elements into video slices, still images, audio and text messages is necessitated by technical constraints that dictate small file sizes. These bite size narrative chunks form the basis of a unique aesthetic signature. Unlike television or cinema, the intimate and portable nature of the mobile device enables on-demand engagement with content in non-traditional spaces.

This view is further examined by Ben Jones, creative director of U.K based creative media agency “the-phone-book Limited” Over the past five years, Jones and partner Fee Plumley have navigated the virtual and physical world presenting workshops in mobile media, as well as instigating innovative mobile projects and content. Jones observes:

The fact that the viewer is being broadcast to on a one-to-one basis (as opposed to the TV system of one to some, or the cinema system of one-to-many) changes how they view the work.

Also, the fact that some of the audience will be ‘in transit’, maybe on a bus or a train, whilst others are perhaps perched on a park bench, as opposed to sat down comfortably at home (or in a cinema) changes the experience as well. (Jones, 2005)

The mobile phone is perhaps a storytelling device that acknowledges the journey of the user in both the physical and screen world. Environment ultimately influences the viewer experience. *Velocity* may be fun to watch with friends at the office, though it may also scare the pants off you when you ride the last bus home alone.

Plate 3: Still’s from Marousia’s Notes from the Maze: Julia’s Obsession
Marousia’s narrative, *Julia’s Obsession* is an episodic drama that explores the world of Julia, a character who is not seen yet her presence is palpable. The dark facades and streetscapes of Julia’s world invite an evocation of memory. Feelings of isolation fuse with voyeurism in this strange screen world where time appears to stand still. Julia’s world may occupy a geography located in contemporary Vietnam, but it also exists as a representational reality that awaits viewer interaction to imbue the story with personal meaning.

Using text, sound and animated still images to create the illusion of movement, Marousia fashions a narrative that draws from ‘noir’ to create its moody atmosphere. The visuals share the cold aesthetic quality of close circuit television, but who is monitoring whom in this hall of mirrors? What lies in the room beyond the hallway and who is Julia?

The intimacy of the mobile screen and the personal relationship between the device and the user, whereby the device is often perceived as an extension of the self inspired the pursuit of a narrative aesthetic where the boundaries between the narrator, the central character and the viewer are blurred. Such narrative devices are a departure from both cinema and other forms of visual story telling such as graphic novels, comics and animations. Clearly, the mobile miniature screen and its accompanying constraints invite writers and artists to play with representation and genres to create different ways of telling stories that fall outside of established practice.

In combination, conventions and clichés taken from cinema and games and the manner in which the creators use them give each of these three miniature narrative works a singular aesthetic signature and thereby avoid hyperarticulation.

**Conclusion**

At first glance the mobile phone is a genie’s lamp, a magical portal to entertainment and communication nirvana. The small screen is a mirror scape reflecting our dreams and desires in the form of a miniature narratives stored deep within the heart of the mobile device. These miniature narratives may have the potential to liberate both the story and the author by providing the means to generate narratives that defy existing aesthetic codes and conventions. However, there are implications for artists and storytellers working with mobile devices to construct narratives for the small screen.

Miniature narrative and the associated aesthetics are infused with a meaning that requires the viewer to adopt a new means of interpreting narrative. The image looks out from within a tiny frame towards a physical world where meaning is constructed based upon the viewers relationship with the mobile object. The mobile device is a portal for transient and ephemeral narratives that exist briefly within the heart of the machine. Disembodied communications from loved ones; friends and work colleagues share a non-hierarchal place with playful chat and gossip. Our human interactions and emotions are computated and coded into a list. Now stored as the digital debris of our endeavours to reach out into the networked universe to connect briefly with the human interface.
Like the robot, we can ask ourselves: Where is the cogito, the place of my self consciousness, when everything I actually am is an artefact- not only my body, my eyes, but even my most intimate memories and fantasies” (Coyne, 1999, p. 274)

References


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