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Narrative and Mobile Media

The rapidly increasing use of mobile communication technologies, especially within urban spaces, offers a new medium for telling stories, reading cities and personal authoring within these spaces. Mobile phones are reshaping the way we communicate, interact and live. From mobile phones to PDA's, humans are able to move through their daily lives unhinged from their home or office without skipping a beat. As Anthony Townsend notes, "The diffusion of the mobile phone has been among the fastest of any technology in history, and they are rapidly supplanting conventional wired phones. By 1999 there were nearly 500 million mobile telephones in use throughout the world, which accounts for over one-third of the world's entire installed base of telephones."[1] With this upsurge in mobile phone usage has come more technological capabilities and applications, leading to new ways of using ones mobile phone for a variety of communication functions. It is not uncommon to see mobile users snapping pictures with their phones, sending a text message, checking and sending email, listening to music, or playing a game, and of course, the occasional phone call.

As Sadie Plant asserts in her study, "On the Mobile", "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

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[1] Townsend, A., "Mobile Communications in the 21st Century City", from
http://urban.blogs.com/research/Townsend-TheWirelessWorld-BookChapter.PDF

that new, emerging world."[2](Plant, 76) As the term "mobile phone" implies, this now-common device offers the user the mobility to explore this "emerging world" by being unleashed from the private space of the home or office, where phones have traditionally been used. Thomas Elsaesser, writing in the January 2003 *PMLA*, suggests that the mobile phone nudges film theory "to draw level with the multivocal surround immersion of space" offered by television and the internet, in contrast to the traditional "monocular, unifocal, perspectival projection of space, to which…our subjectivity is said to have been in thrall" (Elsaesser, 122). Even more than tv and internet, the mobile phone is indicative of and part of our existence in a constantly mediated space, and the mobile phone offers us access to other spaces and times. Coupled with the near-ubiquity of the mobile phone, this capability of the phone as a conduit for multiple connections and perspectives in any given space positions it as a catalyst or potential vehicle for the simultaneously interactive and immersive media experience. And, the mobile experience, one that capitalizes on the locative and interactive and immersive qualities of the medium, operates as a narrative, a concept described by film theorist Edward Branigan as a "distinctive strategy for organizing data about the world"—here, a postmodern world characterized by fragments of information coming from many directions.

This paper suggests that a range of mobile media based experiences developed over that past couple of years exist within a "pattern of tension created by the coexistence of old and new", as historian Carolyn Marvin describes all new media. Also, we contend that these mobile narratives offer a manifestation of the idea of "city as text". Finally, we propose that the mobile narrative represents, above other forms of interactive and

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[2] Plant, S., " On the Mobile", P. 76

narrative-based new media, a seamless blend of interactivity and immersion facilitated by the cinematic history of the telephone.

The Old vs. The New

There are two sets of old and new at work here. The first is that alluded to by Elsaesser above, that Western culture's representation of space and subjectivity as from a single point of reference is shifting to one born of multiple inputs, with our stories of understanding our world increasingly authored from below. The second area of tension, expressed by Lev Manovich, is between the old cultural organization and understanding of data as a narrative and the new structure of the computer age of the database. We shall see in the ensuing analysis that these mobile narratives draw from both sides of what Manovich positions as an exclusive binary, suggesting perhaps that rather than an *exclusionary* relationship, narrative and database, as two methods of cultural expression, exist in *productive* tension.

Perhaps the best known mobile experiences are the pervasive games designed by Swedish company It's Alive! and the British group Blast Theory. *Botfighters* (It's Alive), in many ways, is a live action video game like *Halo*, with location information, referencing a fictional future world, and game play battles handled through the mobile phone, and with a web-based backstory periodically updated to offer new missions and recontextualize game world developments. Blast Theory's projects, including *Uncle Roy All Around You* and *I Like Frank* among others, work like cooperative treasure hunts with online and street players having access to different elements and developing cooperation strategies via SMS messaging. With their procedural and participatory environments

oriented around spatial exploration, these mobile games fit Manovich's contention that in the new cultural order, database is the primary structuring device. Spatial annotation projects, such as *Yellow Arrow*, *[murmur]*, and *Urban Tapestries*, also seem to privilege a database structure. These projects allow the participant to author personal diary-like episodes into the database of materials, available to future navigators of the same urban terrain.

If we apply Edward Branigan's narrative schema and modes of collecting and understanding data, these projects might be construed containing some combination of episodes, unfocused chains and focused chains. Branigan suggests that a narrative is comprised of a series of episodes put together as a focused chain. These mobile experiences would fail the Branigan test as a narrative structure in a traditional conception of narrative, though the episodes and unfocused chains of events are narrative-like and the backstory would qualify as a simple narrative. *Botfighters* represents an example, similar to many video games, in which a computational structure works in tandem with narrative or narrative-like components to create the complete experience.

The GPS-enabled tablet-PC based mobile project *34N118W* shares the database structure exhibited by these mobile games but introduces specific fictional stories as the primary data element encountered by the participant. The grid of the downtown area contains the data set—a combination of recorded text and visual correlations. The participant serves as the search engine, walking through this grid of data elements, encountering them in the sequence of his or her own choosing. In this way, *34N118W* shares the characteristics of the digital environment outlined above in terms of the mobile

games. The tablet PC executes a regular series of procedural functions to properly depict the participant's location on the map, as well as play the audio elements at the appropriate place. The participatory and spatial elements exist physically in terms of perambulation, metaphorically in terms of searching this database, and interpretively (what Hight might call "archeologically") in terms of considering the told and untold stories relating to the place, the point at which narrative exists as a form of expression in this piece.

Can a non-sequential, locative media, database structure be combined with a narrative structure soundly rooted in the principles of cause-and-effect, along with character growth and development, and thus representing a equal hybrid of database and traditional narrative structure? This combination lies at the heart of the student project *Tracking Agama*, an alternative reality fiction[3] in which participants access pieces of the story by mobile phone, through entering codes, exchanging text messages with the host computer and receiving phone calls. The participant obtains codes by solving puzzles embedded within the story, which successively give access to more and more "story nuggets".

Tracking Agama shares *34N11W*'s dual design structure as both an interface to a multimedia database and a navigation method through spatialized representations. The story nuggets consist of audio (recordings made by Agama called "AgamaNotes", calls from Shufelt), website text, and text message. The mobile phone serves as the interface for accessing this information and receiving instructions or puzzles about further action to take or information to discover. In pursuing this action or information, the participant

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[3] This term is adapted from "alternative reality game", which describes games that blur the line between game events and real world events, such as "The Beast", *I Love Bees* and the game depicted in the film *The Game* (David Fincher, 1997), starring Michael Douglas.

travels to six locations in Los Angeles. The AgamaNotes offer insight into the character's state of mind, consideration of particular landmarks, imaginative use of the landmarks as settings for further fictions and subtly suggest to the participant alternative ways of looking at the location. The city becomes represented not only by the text evident on tourist placards, but through layered context delivered to the participant in the space and closely associated with physical exertion of navigating the locale (much like *34N118W*). It is clear then, that *Tracking Agama* has a foundation in database structure and computational operation—one side of the tension between the new and the old that Marvin pointed out as a key cultural element of new media. The other side of this tension, in terms of modes of cultural expression, is the traditional form of narrative. Applying Branigan's models, we see the AgamaNotes as collecting Agama's experiences, thoughts and sometimes events (such as when a kidnapping interrupts Agama's recording), in a particular setting. The calls from Shufelt in combination with the tasks completed by the participant reveal the causal connections between the episodes, and successive episodes depict the growth and change of the characters (such as the revelation that Shufelt, initially positioned as a friend of Agama, is in fact his enemy). Above and beyond the simple narrative of a series of episodes arranged in a focused chain, *Tracking Agama* exhibits a complex narrative structure with a not-necessarily-sequential arrangement of Branigan's component schema, including abstract, orientation, initiating event, goal, complicating action, and climax/resolution. The narration consists of the participant's accessing of the various story nuggets and piecing together the complex temporal structure that incorporates historical events, recent fictional events (such as the initiating event of Agama's kidnapping heard over the phone as the

participant listens to Agama's musings about Union Station), and developing fictional events (such as Shufelt's requests for research and detective assistance).

The City As Text

The city can be regarded as a text in and of itself, with its buildings, streets, parks and people full of histories and stories, waiting to be read or experienced. In discussing "emerging metaphors of the city and culture", Nan Ellin views the city as a text, allowing "for an infinite number of perspectives or 'readings' of urban and cultural experiences" (Ellin, 3). With a shift in the capacity for information flow between people via mobile devices, there is a new territory for sharing these perspectives and "readings", lived or fictitious, with others in the community, be it residents or visitors. Cities provide an infrastructure and location for storytelling, like a movie location or setting for a novel, while mobile phones can a new means of telling a story within the confines and playing off the features of the city spaces. These mobile narratives invites the individual to become more a part of their physical environment, to become more engaged with the city than they might as they simply move through on their way home or to work. By offering the urban pedestrian a medium for sharing their story through spatial annotation, the author is given the agency to stop, look around their space, identify the sights and sounds and smells that might get lost in the everyday chaos of the city. These are the elements of the city as a text that can be rediscovered, or more thoughtfully experienced, when the mobile phone user is offered a platform with which they can share an experience in the urban environment.

In "Walking in the City", Michel de Certeau helps us to understand the importance of a pedestrian in a city. He sees the pedestrians as someone "whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of the urban 'text' they write without being able to read", in which "intertwined paths" of footsteps "give their shape to spaces. They weave places together. In that respect, pedestrian movements form one of those 'real systems' whose existence in fact make up the city."[4](de Certeau, 93) In this respect, by recognizing the transmedia qualities of the mobile phone in city spaces and using the tools provided by the mobile phone, de Certeau's pedestrian is no longer unable to "read" the text they write as they travel though the city. The mobile narrative projects materialize these more intangible and theoretical ideas of de Certeau. New technologies afford us both new ways of writing and reading urban spaces in that one may now share their writing of the city with the next pedestrian who passes through, or author a story with which a person can interact and feel as if they have become part of the city's broad cultural narrative.

The Interactive, The Immersive, and The Telephone

The computational element of new media introduces possibilities of interaction by the viewer/reader/participant, and the power this confers on this individual is the holy grail of new media. From the proto-hypertextual novels of Calvino and Cortezar to the fanciful dreams of *Star Trek*'s "Holodeck", interactivity has brought with it the idea of agency, empowering the reader or viewer or participant "to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices" (Murray, 126). Within the cooperation of

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[4] deCerteau, M., "The Practice of Everyday Life", 1985. In this specific passage, de Certeau quotes Ch. Alexander's use of "real systems" from "La Cite semi-treillis, mais non arbre," Architecture, Mouvement, Continuite, 1967)

computational operation and narrative structure lies the capacity to realize this agency in material forms, and for those seeking this goal the tension lies not in the computer versus narrative, but finding the ideal combination of the interactive and the immersive. The mobile narratives, resident within the city, using the real physical landscape as their setting, have a tremendous advantage in terms of immersion. Incorporating an interactive interface, then, that seamlessly integrates with this blend of real and fictional space is another advantage of the mobile narrative—and that device is the telephone.

"Early filmmakers incorporated recent technology into the plots of their films to naturalize film's power to move through space and time" writes Tom Gunning in his article "Heard Over the Phone" about the telephone in early film (187). Telephone assists in the naturalizing of film's control of space and time and reciprocally this cinematic representation naturalizes the telephone's role in controlling or modulating access to narrative information. Gunning's fascinating article offers a detailed analysis of the use of the phone in combination with cinematic techniques in rescue melodramas from Pathé's *terrible angoisse* (~1907) to Griffith's *The Lonedale Operator* (1911), and demonstrates the long history as the phone as a central and natural device to bride space/time through narrative, particularly in rescue melodrama. By the 21st Century, the rescue melodrama takes hyperkinetic form in the Fox Television program *24*. Here the mobile phone becomes a tool of multiple uses: nefarious legal action by über-terrorist Marwan (Season 4); an execution by Kim Bauer via telephonic proxy (Season 2); and every conceivable transmission of cause-and-effect narrative information and collapsing of time and space for superhero Jack Bauer in this over-determined melodramatic extravaganza (Seasons 1-4).

Films like *Sorry Wrong Number* naturalize the telephone as a conduit to narrative information. As the viewer's narrator, lead character Leona controls access to narrative units through her use of the phone, whether these narrative units are significant plot events such as the discovery of the murder plot, or other narrations which shed light on Leona and her situation. The telephone triggers flashbacks and offers representations of other characters' knowledge of Leona (Telotte, 38). This utilization of the phone as a narrative control device appears in *Tracking Agama* as well. The AgamaNotes are Agama's narrations, and the phone also exposes the participant to significant plot events, such as the kidnapping, by overhearing the action, just like Leona in *Sorry Wrong Number*. The control of revelations in *Tracking Agama* is also managed through the phone, as the participant must input codes and text messages in order to receive the corresponding narrative content.

In addition to its naturalized role as a control mechanism for narration, the telephone also has been used as a nodal point in narrative progression, representing at least two paths of action for the character, presaging electronic interactivity. Luis Buñuel's 1974 film *Phantom of Liberty* shows the phone in this manner. The film is structured as a series of episodes proceeding along its narrative vector until an intersection with another episodic vector takes the film in another direction. In one memorable sequence, the vector of the police commissioner playing dominos and chatting up an attractive woman is interrupted by a phone call. Indicating the two possible paths, the police commissioner initially refuses to take the call in order to continue his conversation with the young woman. He ultimately takes the call, sending the film on a new vector from the bar to a graveyard and an incident with police officers

who do not recognize their commissioner. In this sequence, the telephone serves as a natural conduit for narrative control and as a representation of character agency—to take the call and launch on a new vector, or to refuse.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, we might ask ourselves why so much attention is and recently has been placed on interactivity and narrative. As mentioned at the outset, narrative is a method of arranging information to promote understanding—a discursive patterning, to quote film, culture and new media theorist Marsha Kinder, "of all sensory input and objects of knowledge". Traditionally, we have understood narrative to construct this pattern with a particular logic of causality, temporality and spatiality—a beginning, a middle and an end, cause and effect, the features Branigan describes above. But postmodern culture's heavily mediated state destroys and explodes these traditional patterns. More than simply a technological feature, interactive narrative responds to deeper fissures and negotiations of authorship, authenticity, veracity and the authority to tell stories. Similar features, particularly the desire and capability to have at least some minor influence, motivate, at least in part, the explosion of reality television (think *American Idol*), blogging (think of BBC and CNN dependence on bloggers for tsunami coverage) and are contributing motivators towards interactive narrative. As narrative deals with negotiating these aspects of culture it must change in response to this developing landscape and morph from the more structured and presented notions of a contained and authored narrative offered on the page or cinema/television screen, to one that accommodates a cooperative effort between creator and participant, and thus the

experiential element of the narrative structure becomes a crucial and a foregrounded aspect for consideration. We propose that mobile narratives, with their emphasis on an experiential component, direct engagement with new articulations of relationships between space and time and especially the postmodern city, and their naturalized interface device of the phone handset are particularly salient examples of a developing art form negotiating, patterning and understanding our changing experience.

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