

Site-Specificity, Pervasive Computing, and the Reading Interface

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Abstract

Through a media archaeology approach, this paper offers a historical grounding for emerging mobile media storytelling projects. By linking these locative media projects to the larger history of attaching narratives to specific places, these projects build on practices that have been done for millennia. From stone inscriptions to the stories that accompany religious pilgrimages, from graffiti in early Rome to historic walking tours of cities, the practice of sited narratives has many precedents. The desire to attach story to space (and to do so through pervasive and mobile computing) is found in the connection between the historical context of a community and the need to determine the character of that space. Around these two points arises a contention over *who* is actually allowed to tell the story of a location. A site's dominant narrative is often told through durable while the narratives on the margins are relegated to ephemeral media.

Keywords

Mobile media, pervasive computing, digital storytelling, urban markup, locative technologies

Introduction

When our perspectives of our mobile media practices go from being so familiar that they seemingly disappear and instead shift to a perspective where we see entirely new ways of using these devices, the results can be revolutionary. This shift is a transformative one. This paper begins to gesture toward such shifts taking place around us. Emerging storytelling projects offer some of the best examples of the transformative potential of mobile media. The projects referenced in this paper typically take the mobile device out of the realm of the everyday and insert it into practices that reimagine our relationship to technology, place, and our own sense of self in the spaces we move through. As such, this paper argues for a departure from the work of ubiquitous computing researcher, Weiser (1999), who argued, "The most profound technologies are those that disappear. They weave themselves into the fabric of everyday life until they are indistinguishable from it" (n.p.). Instead, through heightened visibility, these projects demonstrate profoundly unique ways of using mobile media.

However, such shifts in perspective can be challenging to accomplish. The goal, therefore, of storytelling projects like *[murmur]*, *On This Spot*, *Curzon Memories*, and *These Pages Fall Like Ash* is to "defamiliarize" people with their places and the technologies that mediate these places. In order to accomplish this defamiliarization, artists, authors, and scholars often turn to what is called "creative misuse," or finding a way to use mobile media and software, like iPhone apps, in ways that they were never intended. The result is often a deeper sense of place and a stronger understanding of our own position within that place.

The History of Site-Specific Storytelling

People have attempted to tie stories to places for as long as stories have existed. The meaning of a story is affected by the place in which the story is told and, similarly, the meaning of a place tends to be told through stories. By employing a media archaeology approach (Gitelman, 2008; Huhtamo, 2011; Parikka, 2012), an analysis of mobile story projects is contextualized in light of the historical practices of sited narratives. Drawing on a similar methodology, pervasive computing scholar McCullough (2008) has contrasted "durable" inscriptions—such as those carved into stone or into the side of a building—to "ephemeral" inscriptions like graffiti, banners, and billboards that aren't as long-lasting and are characterized by their transitory nature. He

Those with economic wealth and political clout tend to be the ones who are able to place durable inscriptions throughout a city. They can afford the statue of a particular war hero or politician, linking the life of this figure to the place where the statue is located. In contrast, graffiti functions similarly to tell a certain story or life of a place but tends to be done by those without the power or political clout to create durable inscriptions. These inscriptions often serve to stand in opposition to the legal and “authorized” ways of storytelling about a place.

Mobile media storytelling projects seek to intervene in these dichotomies by sitting at the hinge of durable and ephemeral inscriptions. Also, as McCullough notes, contemporary mobile media narratives fall somewhere along the spectrum between the durable and ephemeral inscriptions that characterize such urban markup. New forms of urban markup that utilize mobile technologies are “neither organized ‘media’ as the twentieth century knew them, nor random graffiti as all the ages have witnessed.” These forms of site-specific markup are seen in the “new practices of mapping, tagging, linking, and sharing [that] expand both possibilities and participation in urban inscription” (p. 69).

The Mobile Device and Medium-Specificity

Thus, while it is vital to situate these mobile digital storytelling projects historically (and understand how they are developing on things like stone inscriptions on buildings, graffiti, or the Stations of the Cross), it is also important to ask, “What is unique about storytelling projects that use mobile media?” Linking media archaeology with material culture methods (Hayles, 2004; Doane, 2007; Brown, 2010), I explore how these projects make important advancements on the process of writing, distributing, and reading a story.

Mobile media (broadly) are spatial media and thus are uniquely equipped to engage with site-specific narratives. Yet, there are things about contemporary mobile technologies that are distinct in comparison to previous media for storytelling. Tapping into this mode of exploration is called “medium-specific analysis” and asks us to understand that the medium’s unique capabilities (and constraints). These affordances and constraints will significantly affect the content of the story and the experience of it (Hayles, 2004, p. 67-90). A medium-specific analysis understands that the medium will often impact the ways a story is told, distributed, and experienced. This impact is often because of issues like the interface (does an author want to compose a long text on the small keyboard of a mobile phone?) or the cultural expectations (do we read stories on an iPad in very similar ways that we read them on a print book because that is what is culturally accepted?).

Conclusions: The Problems of “Narrative” and “Story”

While we can layer multiple stories on a site to tell a range of perspectives about what a place means, the process can involve some challenging hurdles that are inherent in *all* acts of storytelling. Often, the idea of “narrative” itself is rife with problems because it tends to put forth an idea of a cohesive, linear story about a site, an event, or a community. Certain historical narratives are a good example. Some approaches, as performance studies scholar Román (1998) notes, seek to tell an “official history” of an event (Román cites the origin stories told about the emergence of HIV/AIDS). These “totalizing narratives . . . [present a] genealogy of AIDS [which] overdetermines the arrival of AIDS and obscures the process(es) of AIDS.” As such, “AIDS will continue to be understood within the confines of these narratives of origin” (p. xviii-xix). For Román, any narrative or history of AIDS needs to be presented as multiple and discontinuous rather than cohesive and linear.

Projects that utilize mobile media to tell stories offer possible futures of narrative and an intervention to these concerns about the limitations of story. [*murmur*], *Rider Spoke*, and *On This Site* thus embrace the subjective experiences of the storyteller and reader (and thus offer narrative practices that encourage fragmentation, limited point-of-view, and the insertion of many voices to help offset the limited perspective of the individual reader or storyteller).

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