

Mobile Fictions, Interactivity and the Social Re-configuration of Public Space

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This article examines two recent mobile fictions, "I Like Frank in Adelaide" (1) and "Go this Way"(2).

Both creative events were performed through interaction with mobile communication technologies.

I argue that to understand the production of interactivity in these works and the reconfiguration of urban sites as new media spaces, one needs to explore how the technological is cultural, and how telecommunication technologies that allow a sense of being/journeying in place/space mediate and produce subjectivity, identity and the experience of place in these new media spaces.

A further intention of the article is to engage with the concerns that writers like Palmer express for a renewed focus on modes of "spectatorship" as they apply to digital media and artistic practices (Palmer 2001). "Spectatorship" is not an appropriate word for electronic and networked communication spaces that imply mobility and interactivity with publics, however it acts as a provocation towards an investigation of the relationships between the works themselves and the publics who interact/produce them. An unfortunate contribution to misunderstanding the public's relationship to many locative media art works is the argument that telecommunication events, as immaterial art works, produce no new media objects and therefore cannot be conceived

in the same way as other art or media forms. (Manovich 2001). This argument is often used to support the problems associated with documenting the events or regarding them as significant objects of aesthetic or ethnographic enquiry, events in which artists provide a context but where publics themselves in real time in fact produce the event. The institutional research context has more recently accommodated and invested in the technological aspects of selected locative media works, however, an understanding of their producer/participants often remains camouflaged within the dynamics of the events themselves. This article does not propose an approach or methodology for designing new forms of research that might address these problems, however it consciously draws on writers who critique the development of interactivity and subjectivity in new media environments from the perspective of their understandings of their precursors in earlier media forms, such as writing, television and radio. It must be stated here also that the article is not a “description of two interactive events”, designed to evidence theories about interactivity or “spectatorship” with mobile and locational based media works. Rather, it takes those events as objects to explore the relationships produced between components of their social construction from a cultural studies perspective. The article’s broad intention is thus to contribute to the existing scholarly conversation that concerns itself with a reconceptualisation of the “subject”, “place” and “identity” with site-specific art.

1. Game Zone: “I Like Frank in Adelaide”, Real-time Interactivity, Tele-presence and Place

“ I ’m happy you could make it. I want you to help me find Frank. He was here one time with me. I remember a fair amount about where we went and what we did.... We were never lovers, it wasn’t like that. Barely friends. But there are fleeting moments that register deep inside and they never leave....And now

you're here to help me and so are the others. I can tell you what I know but some of these memories are so old I can't even be sure they happened at all. All I know is that thinking of Frank makes me ache, like a hollow, aching hunger".

(Text message excerpt, delivered in the opening moves of the game, *I Like Frank in Adelaide*, on a website for online players and on the screen of mobile devices for those playing on the "real" streets.) (BLAST THEORY 2004)

For two weeks, in March 2004, "gamers" (3) took to Adelaide's city streets, as part of its biennial arts festival, puzzling the identity behind this message and their own identities, while searching its urban cityscape and locations, alongside computer rendered representations of this "place" in cyberspace, for a sighting of the enigmatic but missing Frank.

After 60 minutes of playing, each player on the ground was congratulated on finishing the game, whether they'd found Frank or not, and asked the question, "Do you feel any closer to the people on the street around you?" (Mitchell 2004), an ambiguous question, depending on whether you were thinking of the non-playing publics you encountered on the real streets, or whether you were thinking of your partners in the computer rendered, cyberspace streets who'd assisted your search. Perhaps you were puzzling over what it meant to interact with people in both spaces. This questioning of a reconstituted social environment and the inter-subjective experience it produced was artistically motivated. Blast Theory artist, Matt Adams, asserts that one of the intentions of the game was to create a play "with the city as a very banal space in which we commute to work and buy toilet paper, and an incredibly fantastical space in which anything may happen", blurring the boundaries for people on the streets, and allowing new

social relationships to form "between the different kinds of players in the game....(Bersten 2004)"

Most of the instructions players received required either a conversation with publics on the street in order to receive directions to different locations, or impromptu performances in public cafes, bars and other social spaces (including spontaneous dances, songs and poetry), to receive clues as to where Frank might be. The interactions that resulted can thus be understood as a disruption to what Madanipour describes as the "exchange among strangers", (Madanipour 2003) in the city, where encounter with the market economy or civil society is usually a regulated, ritualised and more distanced performance from the more intimate personal and private spheres of interaction. The game's design thus forced the intrusion of personal and intimate social agency and subjectivity into these instrumental spaces, blurring the mask, "the boundary between the public and the private in an individual" (Madanipour 2003).

"I Like Frank", which was played simultaneously on the streets and online, produced a mobile telecommunications environment that exploits the interactive properties of real-time communications. The mobile capability enabling the game may be new but, as we know, real time, interactive communication is not new, and nor are telecommunication artworks that explored these operants, before the advent of mobile and wireless networks. From the late 1970's, particularly with the advent of satellite communications, artists have been experimenting with the interactivity of live telecommunications and the capabilities of realising dynamic works that synthesised real-time with early forms of mixed reality participation. The earliest communication as performance experiment was Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz's, *Satellite Arts* (1977), which linked dancers, 2000 miles apart for three days, in outdoor locations in the US. Roy Ascott's, *La Plissure du Texte- A*

Planetary Fairy Tale, utilised one of the earliest computers, the Sharp Artbox/Artex system to go active online for twelve days in 1983, linking global participants in the creation of a remote, interactive authoring process. Most significantly, Galloway and Rabinowitz's 1980 real-time project, *Hole-In-Space, A Public Communication Sculpture*, anticipated the pleasures of remote public encounter when it utilised satellite communications to create a new social space, linking publics in the streets of New York and Los Angeles via screens in shop windows (Chandler & Neumark 2005).

The interesting interactive social feature of the real-time in "I Like Frank" was the limited use of "tele-presence" enabling public and online players to unite with each other in the game, thus producing the game and place in two separate sites. This was achieved with wireless networks and handsets for the street players, which allowed navigations and text messaging between those on the street with up to twenty players online. Both sets of players utilised the interface of an interactive map of the city, which displayed representations of the square mile in the Adelaide CBD. The maps also shared co-ordinates for player orientation and representations of their positions and movements. Online players could join in from Adelaide, Sydney, Perth, Brisbane, Darwin, London and New York. Each online player followed a series of tasks that would get them closer to Frank, but could only complete their tasks through real-time communication and intervention with a street player. Players could change relationships but the symbiosis between street and online player was essential to finding "Frank".

Using the term "tele-presence" usually invokes elite, exotic or futuristic imaginings of interactivity environments, not usually associated with the public streets, however, Morse defines it simply as interactive control from a distance, of an image that is representative of physical aspects of the world, (Morse 1998). Morse argues that this link between remote

control and the image provides the image with an “aspect of agency” or symbolic power over subjects and events. It is “no longer just a medium or a place” (Morse 1998). In “Frank” this agency was creatively contextualised as the act of exploration of the game zone and the capability to get other players on the street (if they co-operated) to perform tasks that would progress mutual interests in the game. Thus tele-present agency was both creatively and technologically limited, in that it did not allow the fuller, audio visual, remote control and agency seen in scientific or militaristic applications and used the act of negotiation and reciprocity (between street and online players) as a creative intervention to online player control.

One web blogger, who played both online and the street, commented that the “I Like Frank” technology and communications network was, “pushing the limits of social interaction” (Moshi Moshi 2004). But what might this mean? Returning to the question that was posed to each street player as they completed their 60 minute search for Frank, “Do you feel any closer to the people on the street around you?” one person noted in a review of the game,

“Truthfully, I had felt frantic and somewhat disconnected until the moment he (a member of Blast Theory) asked the question. It was then that a transcendent affection for the people in this city gently drifted back into view. I quickly penned an answer on the back of the postcard I had collected and moved to return the headset to base” (Mitchell 2004).

This was not an overtly negative review of the Game and in other sections the author describes the event as fun and novel, as do other Bloggers I could locate. Nonetheless, the experience of being frantic and disconnected, along with a return to consciousness of an idea of place (i.e. affection for the people in the city), relates to the idea of the

production of the "non place" that Virilio argues real-time, telecommunications produce, destroying any conventional ideas of being "here and now" or "elsewhere", (Virilio 1997), an "atopos" that the philosopher Casey asserts is a thought experiment too difficult for the human imagination to perform (Casey 1993).

Casey would argue that the anxieties the player expressed, were associated with the phenomenon of "displacement" and the disorientation experienced by losing connection with the known and familiar place (Casey 1993). Virilio, on the other hand, would contend that the anxiety signalled the vital connection with place had been annihilated altogether, if only in the moment. His argument is that real-time tele-presence eliminates real space and notions of the present. The interface or surface (the interactive representation of the game zone in "Frank") that forms the boundary between the real and transported self interrupts completely, for Virilio, our understanding of what it means to be somewhere, even for a moment, and hence our understanding of time as well. The creation of our presence, in real-time, he contends, creates a substituted, a "commutative elsewhere", transmitted at the speed of light, unconstrained by notions of future/past, geographical horizons or gravity (Virilio 1997). It thus destroys our previous relationships to distance, both those associated with the separation between observer and observed created in natural spaces and those associated with the collapse of distance achieved by communication and transportation technologies of the 20th century (Manovich 2001). The result of this new configuration of presence as screen time in real-time is an experience of complete disconnection for subjects with a sense of identity and place within the urban environment (Virilio 1997)

Juxtaposed to the technological hubris and utopian visions that usually surround new telecommunication advances, Virilio's social prognosis are thus largely, Dystopian. He imagines cities "polluted" by the spread of

real-time telecommunications, a "grey ecology" where advances in remote audio-visual and haptic control will allow our re-incarnation as both sedentary and caged beings within the world as interactive screen. However, he could also be read as being deliberately provocative. Like the artist's who designed the game, he accepts that we now live in a world that splits the two realities, "activity and interactivity, presence and tele-presence, existence and tele-exsistance" (Virilio 1997). He probably would have enjoyed participating as a player, both online and in the street in "Frank", if only to pose his question that might further our understanding of this mystery, "How can we live if there is no more here and if everything is now?" (Virilio 1997)

Other theorists are equally cautious of real-time tele-presence. Morse, for example, cites the ethical and psychic dangers its agency can produce through its capacity to act at a distance to produce remotely controlled violence and psychological and sexual exploitation (Morse 1998). She argues, however, that new communication environments can equally be sites for the production of new forms of inter-subjectivity and relationships that positively mediate and maintain social and cultural discourse. Unlike Virilio, Morse is not as concerned with the concept of the "no place", but rather with the tensions between the emergence of an interactive commercial information society and the connections and interactions in new media spaces that would produce an enriched social imagination. Her argument is that, regardless of varying levels of technological sophistication, this space is predominantly a metaphorical realm "made perceivable by means of a display system" but that our concern should not be so much with the representations on the screens, but understanding, the "fictions of presence" they enact and what sort of place they are bringing into being (Morse 1998).

For Morse there are precursors to our interactions in "mixed realities" that can be found in the relationships produced with audiences with

earlier sound and image technologies. She cites radio and television's adoption of personal modes of address, the "we" or "you" in live or pre-recorded programming, as examples of this fictive presence and intimate interaction with a virtual "here and now". These earlier cultural forms, she argues, have prepared us for interactions with more compelling, live and personal forms of machine produced subjectivity (Morse 1998). The real-time interactive features of playing, "I Like Frank in Adelaide", pursued experiments with the desire Morse also claims will remain integral to our journeys in cyberspace, the pleasures associated with the inter-subjective experience of being "recognised as a partner in a discourse" (Morse 1998), the joys of encounter.

2. "Go This Way"-Writing Place

"Now we're at where x happened and I want to tell you the story that happened here".

I've made up the experiences for the spots. So this is a whole fictional construct. This fictional group of people will be interested in trading these stories and directing each other to these particular sites to tell each other the stories about those sites.

People go to one site and there's stuff on the phone website -you can read some of the stories- and some people will have a link to the site they want to talk about, and they can navigate to different parts of the city to get to those places. Chris Caines, (Chandler & Caines 2004)

For three months in Melbourne, from June to August 2004, publics participated with another mobile event, "Go This Way", created by Australian Chris Caines, again utilising features of mixed reality through journeying around parts of the city accompanied by representations (stories and maps) on hand-held mobile technologies. This project utilised the idea of place and local histories to produce a mobile fiction "made specifically for sites in Melbourne", Chris Caines, (Chandler &

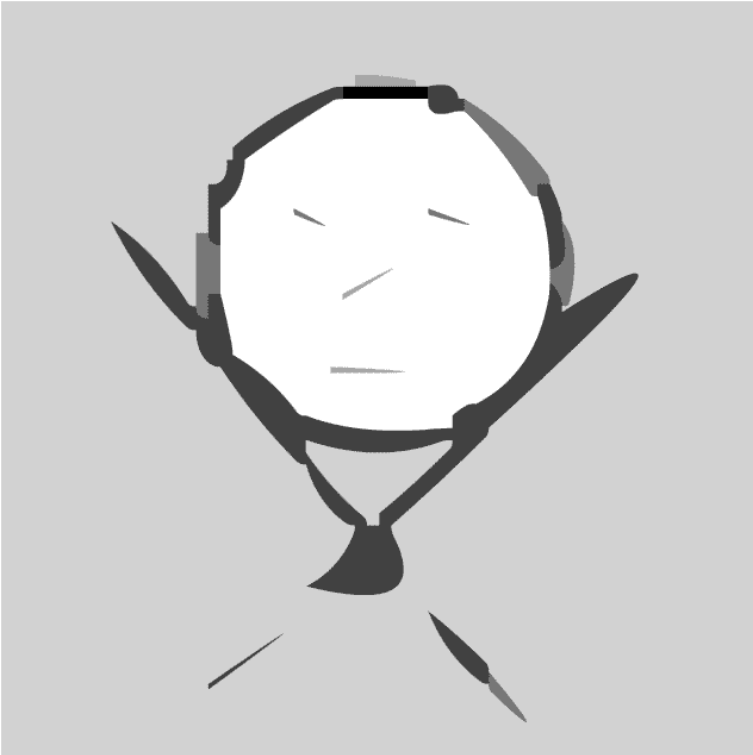


Figure 1 – The Hobo icons were adapted by Caines from the original 1930's hobo signs with the idea that the characters in the work used these to communicate with one another.

Caines 2004). This work, while also structured around the search and discovery of textual objects at urban locations (including commercial premises, like Starbucks), is not premised on game design. "Go this Way" provokes the relationship between place and emotion and explores the creative potential of online as a new writing space for the production of multiple identity, hypertext fictions. The on site fictions comprise both a sign and short text, representations of the "Hobo" language, used by itinerant workers as a means of communicating with each other during the nineteen thirties Depression.

The articulation of site, sign, text and emotion is associated with the practice and critique of urbanism known as Psychogeography, which attempts to co-relate the mood and behaviour of an individual with the effects of a given geographical setting. The outcome, mood based maps that constitute the diversity of places in a city, can be performed by artists, academics or ecologists to produce social fictions, "situations" or games within the urban environment (Psychogeography 2004; Social Fiction Org 2004).

"Go This Way" is promoted as an event of the, "Royal Society of Emotional Geocachers", a fictive re-construction of a contemporary, niche, but public and popular leisure pursuit known as Geocaching, a high-tech treasure hunt played with GPS units that combines the skills of orienteering with a search for a hidden cache. Geo stands for geography, while Caching, a popular computing term with many of its IT players, is also a hiking/ camping term for a hidden place where provisions are preserved. Geocaching is produced in online space for posting co-ordinates for searches and most significantly blogging about searches and experiences. More recently this space has taken on the features of contemporary genre writing to act as a public writing space, with people writing about their searches around themed storylines (i.e. humour, horror, historical). Caines has taken elements of this public pass-time into his design of the story structure for "Go This Way". He's attracted to the personal and confessional features of Blogg spaces, as well as their accessibility, immediacy and episodic nature(ABC Radio National 2002). While sites and signs in the city of Melbourne, constitute the "place" for the story, its characters are produced as postings in electronic "space".

"I'm using a fictional discussion board, blogg type of thing for writing all these characters. It's kind of like "emotional" geocaching. It's all happening over the web interface on the mobiles, so its' designed for smart phones that can pull web pages. I didn't have time to do a blogg before the event starts but I've added some

things so that people can annotate their experiences”, Chris Caines, (Chandler & Caines 2004).

Caines borrowed the conventions of the message boards of <http://www.geocaching.com/> to relate his fictions to the sites in Melbourne, enabling the public to perform similar roles as they would trying to locate a cache. In Caine’s work there were maps, addresses and pictures on the phone site, and the locations were easy to find in downtown Melbourne.

3. Conclusion

The theoretical debates surrounding real-time telecommunications would highlight the need to understand publics in terms of their participatory desires for engagement with the pleasures of intimate and personal modes of address and agency. As a mixed or augmented reality experience (that is one where players are simultaneously in a real space and also one mediated by computer representations), it’s unfortunate, therefore, that the experience and response of publics within many of these events remain somewhat of a mystery. Questions such as, where people thought they were during different intervals of interactivity, on the street and online, as well as the levels of agency (how much they feel they can control or contribute to the experience) and the satisfaction, curiosity or pleasures these relationships produce more than often remain unknown, except for the responses from random participants who post personal bloggs online at their own websites, and only if you search for them. Also the components that constitute public identity and differences amongst participants (race, gender, age, technical aptitudes, motivations and attitudes to the event) largely remain unknown.

Mobile fictions also create the challenge to activate a consciousness of place with publics and “writing the place” in this mix of urban and electronic environments can also be understood in terms of the

participatory pleasures of publics for engagement with personal modes of address and agency. Bolter, for example, in critiquing the development of electronic networked based media, argues that hypertextual and electronic writing (email, MUDS, MOOS, chatrooms and Blogs) that allow conversational immediacy and presence, may represent a future social preference for the mediation of culture. He also argues that these forms of writing have become sites for spontaneous, personal and playful explorations with fluid and fragmented identities that dislodge associations with notions of a fixed, centered or "authentic" self. He cites precedents to these pleasures in television's rich and "saturated" texts, which invite viewers to identify with a number of roles. The advantages in the electronic writing space, however, is the fluidity of "a system that changes to suit its audience" of reader/writers (Bolter 2001). In "I Like Frank" there were opportunities for the game's reconstitution of Adelaide as place, as well as the chase for Frank. The project had the potential, particularly with the popularity of blogging, and the hyper textual pleasures Caines utilises, for this discursive experiment. For example, players could have contributed their own writing of place, their own fictional or real experiences, stories, memories or impressions of the locations they were guided to, as well as expressions about the public performances they engaged with in the quest for Frank. As noted earlier this potential for the integration of local knowledge and fictions with the performance of the game's fiction might have enriched the interactions and provided what Morse argues is the "crucial role of story telling...and different modes of narration as phases of enculturation" (Morse 1998). As such, it could have provided an interesting rewriting of the city of Adelaide by locals, visitors who physically attended the game and those who were "dropped" into it from cyberspace.

1. "I Like Frank in Adelaide" was created by Blast Theory in collaboration with the Mixed Reality Lab at the University of Nottingham.

2. "Go this Way", created by Chris Caines, is a hypertext fiction with mobile phones, presented at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACME) from June to August 2004, as part of "Australian Culture Now"
3. 'Gamer' is the name usually ascribed to people who play online games. It has become a popular way of describing people who participate in artist's mobile fictions, utilising the construct of a game.

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