

‘Now Everything Looks Like a Game’: Mobile Phones and Location-Based Games

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how we may transform peoples’ perceived access to cultural participation by exploiting the possible relationships between place, play and mobile devices. It presents *SCOOT*; a location-based game in order to investigate how aspects of game-play can be employed to evoke at once playful and culturally meaningful experiences of place. In particular this paper is concerned with how the portable, communicative and social affordances of mobile phones are integral to making a “now everything looks like a game” experience.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.4.0 [Computers and Society]: General

J.5 [Arts and Humanities]: Arts, fine and performing

General Terms

Design, Experimentation, Human Factors.

Keywords

Location-Based Game, Mobile Games, Role Play Game (RPG), Creativity, Place, Collaboration, Design, SMS, Thru-Relationships

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses place, play and mobile devices in order to explore how we may utilise everyday places and tools to transform peoples’ perceived access to cultural participation. It outlines how we can transfer aspects of game play to everyday places in order evoke at once playful and culturally meaningful experiences of place. In particular, this paper highlights the role of mobile phones in facilitating these experiences. Rather than focusing on mobile phones in relation to the blurring of public and private spheres or as tools to facilitate the coordination of our work and social lives, this paper considers mobile phones in their capacity to act as tools for creative engagement and production. Along with considering the technical aspects of mobile phones, we identify what we refer to as thru-relationships occurring between people, places and things that are inadvertently created

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by interaction with and around mobile phones. Thru-relationships are those relationships that are revealed, formed, strengthened and even subverted specifically *through* the use of interfaces available to us on and between the web and the mobile devices. Thru-relationships formed during the event are seen as evidence of the success of the intervening interfaces. These interfaces must account for many place-based and game dynamics. Experience in hosting multiple LBGs has revealed the context of the player and the game is part of a complex network of social, spatial, cultural, historical and social factors. [1]

2. SCOOT



Image 1: *SCOOT* Melbourne 2006. Various groups.

SCOOT is a mixed reality event that integrates web, mobile devices and public displays as tools of play to guide groups through unique public places. Simply, players must seek out a mystery objects (interactive carnival boxes) that are hidden in a public place. Players are sent vital clues via SMS challenging them to find and solve clues by playing mini games in both worlds in order to reveal the dynamics of the site and progress in the game. *SCOOT* has successfully been installed and hosted at nine sites on four separate occasions in two different Australian cities (Brisbane and Melbourne).

SCOOT has been designed for various user groups (2 to 6 players) including university students and family groups. Due to resource constraints, each time we have hosted a 3-day event we have cut off the number of registered groups at 300, encouraging them to attempt no more than 2 sites in a day. We designed the SMS pathways in each site to take a group an average of 45-60 minutes. This usually meant there was 15 – 25 SMS clues to be followed,

found, solved and replied depending on the size and resources of the sites. But we found that once the groups had an understanding of the game objectives, many of them took their time to look at other features of the sites. We also observed that some of the groups returned to play on all 3 days, sometimes bringing new friends each visit.

It is important to note that the first two times we hosted SCOOT [2,3] only approximately 30 and 65 percent of the registered groups actually completed respectively. Since then we have revised our design processes and interface media, resulting in a 85% completion rate at the most recent

3. PLACE

The latest iteration of SCOOT [4,5] was played across seven cultural sites of Melbourne, Australia in September 2006 including:

- Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI)
- National Gallery of Victoria (NGV)
- State Library of Victoria
- The Arts Centre
- The Melbourne Museum
- Federation Square
- Art Play

We were attracted to these sites because of their existing cultural and creative qualities. The stakeholders of the sites had already set up ways of viewing cultural artefacts and creative production through linking works, artists, contexts, and stories as part of a curatorial act. Furthermore, due to their role as cultural nodes, these sites evoke a creative, aesthetic, analytic and critical outlook, shaping peoples’ existing perceptions and shared discourses. Along with these dynamics and the exposure of cultural artefacts, we were motivated by what appeared to be a lack of active cultural participation at the sites. Generally, visitors of the sites appeared to be audience members passively receiving cultural knowledge rather than actively responding to it as individuals or as groups. This largely passive role of visitors was seen as a consequence of the perceived authoritative and walled nature of the institutions located at the sites. Fortunately, the stakeholders were very willing and motivated to break out of this institutional mould to alter peoples’ perceptions of the sites and facilitate active cultural participation.

The design team were committed to creating an experience that made the sites, their artefacts and the potential knowledge more accessible. More importantly we aspired to provide multiple ‘excuses’ for people to meet and interact immediately and directly at the many points of interest already authentic and familiar to the sites as well as installing unique SCOOT interactions as part of a uniting activity across the sites.



Image 2 and 3: SCOOT groups in the State Library of Victoria and in the National Gallery of Victoria

To do so, we realised that we would need to provide a different story and motivate new behaviours in order for the visitors to re-imagine their identity in that space and hence their relationships to the people, artefacts and places; as Latham is quoted in [6], “to encounter the world around the self in an active, creative way is central to the self’s ability to recognise and care about the places it inhabits and the people encountered within those places”

4. PLAY

With SCOOT we wanted to transfer aspects of game play to these places to alter peoples’ perceived reading of the sites and evoke playful outlooks and behaviours. The SCOOT team concentrated on the well-established genre of Role Play Games (RPGs) as we found it to be the most compatible to our design intentions. In the case of SCOOT, such broad features include:

- Role-play: in games provides players with an alternate identity, “a reflexive space to break with pre existing features of social identity” [7]. As a registered player, the groups become SCOOT Agents with unique avatar characteristics, customisable inventory and an ID badge.
- Quests: are ultimately provide the incentive to progress in the game and motivators to move through the real spaces reading everyday objects as clues.
- Exploration: the players are taken on a path through and between the sites that is at times familiar and more often unexpected. This is an opportunity to demonstrate new ways of navigating through the space using everyday visual, sonic and textural clues in different ways.
- Narrative: we provide players with a mix of historical and fictional information to animate and subvert their perceptions of the sites and stimulate their imaginations. Linking the artefacts to the actual place and play meant that the players could end up viewing place as an original source of inspiration and as a container of potential stories to be heard, told and ‘made up’.

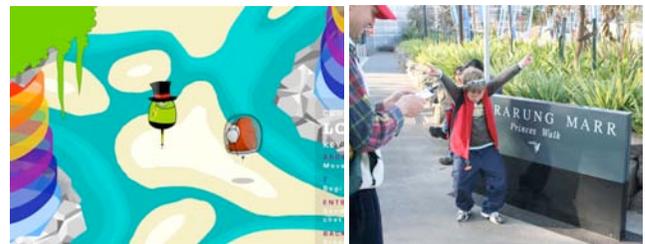


Image 4 and 5: SCOOT World and the ‘Green Team’ in Federation Square, Melbourne

Before starting their orientation through the real spaces of Melbourne, the family groups registered to SCOOT WORLD (image 4) where they customised their avatars, received narrative information on the creatures they were to collaborate with and play games that ‘warm them up’ to the types of interactions they will encounter throughout the event. The intention of SCOOT WORLD is to represent certain aspects of the real world while providing a fictional identity and narrative to superimpose on the real world as the groups acted out unique interactions and unusual pathways as privileged members of a group that shared quest to protect their cultural places from virtual carnival creatures with doggy intentions.

In combination, these features ultimately offer opportunities for visitors to behave in ways normally not considered and view objects with a purpose alternative to their original presentation (image 2, 3 and 5). It is this complex combination of game attributes and actions that led to the experience of ‘now everything looks like a game’. Subverting the behavioural expectations of these spaces was instrumental in the projects aim to break the institutional mould that has previously shaped visitors as spectators of cultural artefacts rather than potential creators. To reinforce peoples’ access to cultural participation, we asked players to design their own *SCOOT* characters based on their experience of the sites. This activity was instrumental in providing us with evidence of the players’ transformed ability to perceive their immediate surroundings as ‘potential space’ for inspiration and a site for everyday people to be active cultural participants.

However, these ideas and acts of subversion, superimposition and transformation are only made possible in the site by the use of mobile phones. The mobile phones provided the technical bridge between the virtual and the real world assets and activities.

5. MOBILE PHONES and THRU-RELATIONSHIPS

In a key point of departure, this paper not only considers mobile phones in their technical capacity, it also reveals and wishes to emphasise what we refer to as ‘thru-relationships’ afforded by interaction with and around mobile phones. Due to the problematic factors associated with mobile phones such as access, costing models, interoperability, and the limited uptake of service applications like bluetooth or GPS, the *SCOOT* team decided to limit the technical use of mobile phones to SMS capabilities. This technical limitation came out of an explicit decision to design for maximum access. We wanted most of all to *link everyday people to everyday places using everyday tools*. As well as communication devices, mobile phones were considered as linking devices, able to create new relationships thru the use of the phone. In the case of *SCOOT*, mobile phones create four significant ‘thru-relationships’. They bridge the fictional/virtual world and the real world; create a shared experience between individuals (image 6); act as signifiers of exclusive membership to the *SCOOT* cultural code (image 7); and alter individual relationships to place. The following image sets are used to illustrate how each of these ‘thru-relationships’ occurred in the most recent instance of *SCOOT* in Melbourne.



Image 6 and 7: Groups in the Melbourne Museum

Mobile phones were instrumental in bridging the virtual and real aspects of the game. SMS messages were sent to the mobile phones of players. These messages conveyed the narrative of the *SCOOT* game, interweaving fictional alien carnival characters with cultural and historical information about the location of the game. In its role as a communication device, the mobile phone

was able to support several of the aspects of game play discussed above. It provided the game narrative, assigned players a quest, and instructed them on how to navigate through the site.

Beyond their functional application, mobile phones inadvertently created new relationships between individual players of the game. The game was played by groups of two or more people. Each of these groups were required to register with only one mobile phone number. Because group members were required to collaborate around one mobile phone, their experience of *SCOOT* resulted in a shared experience and the creation of a collective memory of the site. Many of the groups who played *SCOOT* consisted of parents and children. This facilitated the creation of cross-generational shared experiences. Adults and children normally experience locations such as the State Library of Victoria or the National Gallery of Victoria with often differing motivations. However playing the game allowed these experiences to unite. One mother even noting “you brought his world to my world”.

Another of the ‘thru-relationships’ created by mobile use in the *SCOOT* game, was the connection between groups of players. The mobile phone acted as a signifier, identifying the groups of people who were participating in the game. In flagging participation in the game, mobile phones revealed membership to the *SCOOT* cultural code. So while the game did not require groups to interact, the identification provided by the mobile allowed players to feel shared exclusivity to the experience of place offered by the game. This identification of shared exclusivity was central to imbuing the location with a collective memory and hence the fostering a sense of community.



Image 8: Three *SCOOT* groups in the State Library of Victoria

The use of mobile phones in the context of game play also allowed people to view and interact with their surroundings in new ways. Through facilitating a playful exploration of the location while conveying cultural and historical information mobile phones allowed people to consider their surroundings on a new cultural level. *SCOOT* allowed people to imbue their personal experience of place with a new playful lens.

6. *SCOOT* CAMP- Creative Content Creation

Importantly we consider *SCOOT* a demonstration tool for revealing the potential for imaginative mobile phone use and for framing place as a source for creative content creation. The experience of playing the game allows people to view place and mobile phones as inventory in their creative life. Drawing upon what we have learnt about how people can animate everyday place with the use of mobile phones, we also developed *SCOOT CAMP* [8]. *SCOOT CAMP* is a series of web forms that makes the design process used to create *SCOOT* SMS trails available to

others. We held workshops with local artists in Newcastle 2005 who mapped paths and assigned nodes (points in place where an SMS interaction occurs) through their own neighbourhoods and then simply entered the SMS clues into the web forms. Other participants are then invited to register their mobile numbers into corresponding web forms to instantly play LBGs that guide them through the neighbourhood with a unique local narrative. This way everyday people become creators of their own mobile games to broaden their access to creative production with mobile phones. This became important to the *SCOOT* design team as we soon realised that we increasingly and collectively view local places as filled with potential game content maybe even more intensively than the players of our games. For us particularly, everything looks like a game.

7. CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed how mobile phones in the context of game play can be instrumental in transforming peoples' participation in and perceived access to cultural production. Significantly it has contributed to the field of mobile HCI a new way of conceptualising the potentials of mobile phone use by identifying the 'thru-relationships' afforded by interaction with and around mobile phones. It is hoped that by allowing people to consider the inadvertent relationships created through mobile phone use, the concept of 'thru-relationships' will allow future research to further explore the social outcomes that may be possible with creative mobile phone use.

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Image 8: Some of the members of the *SCOOT* design team

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