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Rewriting neighbourhoods: *Zombies, Run!* and the runner as rhetor

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Introduction

The flaneur is a literary archetype of a young man strolling through the Parisian arcades. He is there to see, but also to be seen, and being the object of spectatorship is integral to the enjoyment of the stroll. Through the flaneur, the likes of Baudelaire and Benjamin have commented on the city itself, analysing it as a text. Much, however, has changed since the flaneur emerged: sprawling suburbs overtake urban centers, the car transformed the stroll to the casual drive, and the Internet has redirected much human wandering towards digital realms. At the same time, digital technology opens up new possibilities for a twenty-first-century reimagining of the flaneur, embodying the principles of a fast-paced, hyper-connected, society.

Recent developments and scholarship in casual gaming have focused on location-based mobile games (LBMG), introducing new populations to gaming and bringing digital games outside. This chapter discusses Six to Start's *Zombies, Run!* (ZR) (Alderman 2012), a gamified mobile running application (app), in the context of how runners use the app to rewrite the functionality

of their own neighbourhoods. Studying how and why runners use ZR invites conversations on how games play a role in daily activities and how this kind of play changes perceptions of shared public spaces. Using phenomenological interviews to research runners who use the app, this chapter analyses the appeal of ZR as a casual game capable of both creating hyper-real experiences for players and allowing them to participate in the composition of the story through in their own regular outdoor runs.

Zombies, Run! is a gamified running app played through a smartphone. The game uses the phone's GPS and runners listen to a narrative interspersed between music loaded on the phone. Players embody Runner 5, a British agent shot down en route to Abel Township (a small survivor colony in suburban England). Runner 5 is sent on various missions to protect or improve Abel. The township is constantly threatened by zombies, larger townships and the mysterious Dr Van Ark. While running missions, players collect supplies and materials that help Abel develop into a thriving civilization. Abel Township is represented as a map within the app that players build through these collected supplies (Figure 12.1). During missions, runners can opt to

FIGURE 12.1 Screenshot of the season one map of Abel.

participate in ‘zombie chases’, where players must increase their speed for about 90 seconds, simulating interval training. The app can be played while running on a treadmill, but players lose some elements of the game, such as the GPS-based zombie chase feature. As a result, many players run outside and, for convenience, in their own neighbourhoods, though they will of course run with the app in other outdoor spaces.

If the app engages players and encourages continued participation, a study of how the game affects the players’ experience with their neighbourhood gives clues to the influence that LBMGs have on everyday spaces. As pervasive media continues to provide more affordances and greater mobility in digital play, studying ZR can allow scholars and developers to assess the needs of individuals invested in LBMG markets and illuminate how to incorporate the success of ZR into other games. To study the app, I began with three research questions:

- 1 Why run with a gamified running app like *Zombies, Run!*?
- 2 Does running with the app encourage runners to run outside?
- 3 Does running with the game alter the way individuals perceive their own neighbourhood?

Review of literature

Research on the use of LBMGs is still in a preliminary stage as smartphone games are a relatively new market and have shown mixed results with regard to their levels of success (de Souza e Silva and Hjorth 2009). Putting mobile game studies in conversation with more theoretical pieces on the rhetorical uses of place yields precedent for the type of research undertaken in this chapter and will be the focus of this literature review. A cultural rhetorical approach helps aid in understanding the ‘why’ behind the popularity of ZR, particularly how both running and popular culture are discussed. While studies exist that analyse the efficacy of running apps for incentivizing exercise through usability (Liu et al. 2011; Stephens and Bryan 2012), analysing the app through the lens of game studies and spatial rhetoric introduces ways that narrative-based games can be used to give a mundane act meaning.

Preliminary research on mobile games and material space begins with Huizinga’s (1949) theory of the ‘magic circle’, an almost sacred space entered into during play. Playing personal mobile games in public spaces is not a new cultural practice; ancient Roman board games have been found throughout its empire (Moore 2011, 374). Similarly, even digital games started out in

public places such as arcades. Adriana de Souza e Silva and Larissa Hjorth argue that playful spaces are a 'subcategory of social spaces in the realm of social practices (perceived spaces), in that they highlight the relationship between daily routine and urban reality' (2009, 604). Historically, games have been played in public with public consent, inviting both casual and fervent spectators. In this way, smaller console and computer games, initially played alone and in private, were the historical anomaly. In many ways the mobile games market re-enters a long-standing public tradition.

LBMGs are instead unique in adapting the magic circle to overlay an everyday place without any visual references between the boundaries of play and non-play. This opens up the possibility of events and places not intended for play to enter games. Likewise, these games can connect local individuals and help players to write new meaning into their everyday spaces (Richardson 2010). Mobile games can provide a wide array of play experiences. They can augment desk and console gameplay by allowing users to chat with players when not logged in or by purchasing or trading goods for in-game experiences (Christensen and Prax 2012). These apps keep players engaged outside the 'magic circle' and increase the player's time inside a game while they are attending to activities outside of gameplay. Mobile gaming apps that augment play allow users more control in how they interface, both with games and public places (De Souza e Silva and Frith 2012; Farman 2012). This augmentation can lend itself to hyper-mediated experiences, but, as Jason Farman notes, the immersive elements of locative media have often been overstated (2012, 81). Instead, 'games are a form of *bricolage*, a type of creative misuse, and through this misuse, players can create a space of critical distance where the process of play can become actions of social critique' (Farman 2012, 78). Play in public invites critical analysis on the acceptable uses of public places. This critical distance is significant for these hyper-mediated games and can have ethical consequences when gamers force others outside of the game to enter play, like when games require players to interact with strangers who are neither willing nor able to participate (Farman 2012, 77). Players must exist in two places, the game place and the material place, while playing LBMGs.

Mobile games allow users to enter the public in new ways and, because space is rhetorical, allow players agency to rewrite meaning in the places they inhabit. Spaces are constructed, both physically and culturally. As such, we carry expectations and manage intention and agency based on location. City and building planners construct spaces to give individuals cues on how to perform and typically encourage the status quo in their planning (Debord 1994). Umberto Eco considers the idea of creating or recreating something as 'reassurance through Imitation' (1986, 57) and our experiences with other similar places affects our behaviour in new venues. Eco also notes

that imitation creates hyper-real atmospheres, wherein individuals enjoy the immersion in hyper-mediated spaces while continually aware of the artifice itself.

Renegotiating the use of public places as unintended by planners requires individuals to behave or move in unanticipated ways. Rhetoric turns to pedestrians to explain this theory. Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) argues that pedestrians mark a significant place in city transportation research because their movements are difficult to determine when compared to vehicles. De Certeau claims walkers are rhetors and their pathways through cities represent several rhetorical tactics. The walkers design their own routes, often against city-planned trajectories, creating what he refers to as a mythic city. Robert Topinka builds on de Certeau's work in his analysis of suburban strip malls and argues that suburban space 'attempts to suppress rhetorical agency and invention . . . [y]et walkers can *turn* the dominant trope of this space' (2012, 66). Topinka finds that contemporary suburban space is intended almost exclusively for personal vehicles. For instance, large parking lots force drivers to circle past various shops before exiting, promoting further consumption. Walkers can instead cut straight from store to road and their consumptive practices are based on what they can physically carry. Runners share some similarities with walkers, but running is culturally coded as a leisure activity. While walking is necessary for any number of daily activities, running is generally thought of as a hobby that one participates in. Creating places where citizens of all ages can be involved in physical activity became a state priority in the twentieth century and parks and recreation centers become important to preserving outdoor locations to counteract 'the neurosis surrounding urbanization, industrialization, the break-up of traditional society and the presentation of relevance, competence and credibility in the self' (Rojek 2010, 86). Not all runners have the time or luxury to head out to parks for a run and the jogging revolution that takes place in the United States during the 1970s and 1980s had many runners taking to neighbourhood roads.

In analysing the ways that gamers play mobile games in public places, rhetorical analysis demands a look outside of the text to consider how cultural objects are perceived and adopted. Christopher Paul argues that significant to the discussion of rhetoric and video games is a rhetorical lens he calls wordplay, which 'uses the tools of rhetorical analysis to better understand the discourse of games and the impact they have on the structure of the game industry' (2012, 3). This cultural rhetorical examination invites consideration of games as cultural artefacts with implications in the material world. *Zombies, Run!*, for instance, is not only a game, but also an artefact rooted in a popular culture currently interested in both zombies and

locative media. Alan Cameron examines zombies' connection to media and new media, noting that 'zombie films place all media under suspicion . . . any form of audiovisual mediation may be associated with the zombie film's representations of physical, social, and hermeneutical disorder' (2012, 68). Cameron investigates how zombies are remediated through cameras and screens, especially in death scenes. Zombies force the subject to consider the body and decay (Cameron 2012). Likewise, zombies are interesting because they are the ultimate pedestrians, moving through spaces with complete disregard for city planning. They have no awareness of culturally accepted uses of space; all spaces are meant for literal human consumption. Zombies are the perfect topic for a running game because they embody the cultural critique inherent in LBMGs, question perceived uses of space and remind players of physical limitations and decay.

Design and method

Participants

The study uses a homogeneous sampling of case studies for five runners who played with the app. Participants were both experienced (had used the app since early 2012, when it became available on iTunes) and relatively new players (less than two months' experience). Runners ranged in ability from beginner (less than two years' experience) to experienced runners who had trained for marathons. All participants had run before using the app. All had run in a variety of spaces (urban, suburban and/or rural). Most of the participants (four out of five) currently live in an urban area of the United States. Two players used iPhones, two used Android devices and one participant used a Windows phone. The operating systems make the app slightly different in visual appearance, but the audio-narrative is the same. All of the participants described their experiences running with the first season of the app. Participants were found through flyers, listserv posts and word of mouth. This method was chosen because the app did not yet have a central online fan community.

Procedures

I used phenomenological interviews to collect data. I chose to do interviews because the research was exploratory in nature and an interview allowed more possibilities for examination than a survey. Participants were interviewed individually in person using audio recording

software. Interviews were structured around nine questions with follow-up questions being common. The interviews took approximately fifteen minutes to complete, but participants regularly talked about the app after the structured interview was over. I collected data on participants' running history, their reasons behind purchasing the app and how they saw their neighbourhoods after running with the app. After my interview, I gave participants the chance to talk about the app in any way they thought would be useful for further research.

Data analysis

Data was analysed using an aggregate process. Interviews were transcribed and then coded. Once coded, text from the transcriptions was aggregated into four larger themes: narrative, media, athletics/running and space. These themes were chosen based on the frequency with which these codes appeared and because the four themes and their subsequent codes were in conversation with each other. This data was analysed using the methodology suggested by Jackson and Mazzei (2012) in *Thinking with Theory in Qualitative Research*, which suggests approaches for scholars to connect empirical data and theory. The process entails coding data, treating that data as a text and applying critical theory to that text.

Results

Why run with a gamified running app such as Zombies, Run!?

When asked why they decided to use the app, participants universally pointed to the app's appeal to popular culture and its transmedia artefacts. Three participants were interested in the app because of their side interest in zombie films or television (citing *World War Z*, *Zombieland*, *28 Days Later* and *The Walking Dead*) and two participants referenced an affinity for zombie video games. Participants either had never used another running app or had only used *Nike+*, a running app once included by default on iPhones. They were not interested in other apps because other running apps did not include the narrative element. Narrative featured heavily in the reasons behind purchasing the app, and all participants commented on the app serving as a motivation for running. One participant mentioned that he used the app exclusively while running his 'everyday neighbourhood run' as a way to beat the tediousness of regular running. Another participant mentioned that he ran listening to audio books before purchasing the app.

While the app has a game element to it that led players to the app, the narrative heavy reality of the game continued to appeal to all the runners and kept them using the app. Running can be a tedious discipline in many ways, demanding the individual to run identical or similar routes three or more times a week. The inclusions of narrative made participants feel like they were going somewhere during the boring spells. The survival-based narrative encouraged participants to keep running beyond when they were tired, which several participants mentioned as a key motivator. One participant mentioned that she was afraid of what might happen if she did not run when the app prompted her to. Here, the unknown consequences align directly with motifs used in horror films. Two participants mentioned that the reactions they had while running were of an adrenaline rush similar to the way one feels while watching a horror film.

These narrative techniques, tied to techniques used in horror, reflect Umberto Eco's notion of the hyper-real. Those who use the app augment a somewhat boring task, but the app also gives individuals the chance to enter into the zombie narratives that have been part of popular culture. In other words, the app is engaging even when running is not boring. Individuals mentioned a desire to make the game even more hyper-real; one wanted the game to allow for multiple runners to run a story together or perhaps construct their own narratives based on their neighbourhoods. This is a desire that the game has since tried to meet with 'air drop' missions, where runners can select geographical checkpoints on their runs. Another participant mentioned that she runs with her dog and mentally incorporates the dog into the narrative to make her own experience more real.

Does running with the app encourage runners to run outside?

All five participants preferred to run outside before they used the app. Most of them preferred to run in suburban or rural settings. Three participants mentioned that they had run on treadmills in gyms, but that it was more tedious and they watch a screen and/or listen to music to break that tedium. If participants had to run on treadmills, they would not run with the app. Participants did find the app to be a motivator, as stated above. So, while it may not change their preference to running outside, it had them running outside faster, longer and more often: this led to more contact with their own neighbourhoods. One participant mentioned: 'When I use *Zombies, Run!*, it has a lot of features that make running easier. Well, I wouldn't say easier, but more fun.' Another said: 'So, I'm fairly confident I still hate running. I still primarily run so that I can eat and/or get in better health. But

it already makes me want to more. It makes the time I'm doing it more enjoyable and that's huge.'

Does running with the game alter the way individuals perceive their own neighbourhood?

Much of the perception of neighbourhood within the interviews related back to a better geographical understanding of the neighbourhood. Most (four out of five) runners learned more about their neighbourhood as they ran with the app, supported by elements intrinsic to the app. The first was that ZR missions run approximately twenty-five to thirty-five minutes. This means that runners are never quite sure when the day's mission will end. They are regularly made to run an even longer distance to ensure that they do not arrive at their front doors before the game is over. All runners reported an increase in speed using the app, which also required that they extend their runs because missions are based on time and not distance. Finally, a feature of the game, zombie chases, forced runners to increase speed and not stop at random intervals; runners often re-routed in order to avoid coming into contact with intersections. One participant noted that the game did not have her reroute, but it did make her much more aware of the time it took her to loop her neighbourhood. Another participant explained that a zombie chase had caused her to run into a part of her own neighbourhood she had never been in that included wooded trails. She is now a regular trail runner.

Safety while running was a key factor for participants. Because many of them used no running app before ZR and few listened to music or audio books on the road, they were all much more concerned about how to run safely while also playing the game. Two participants lived in what they perceived to be less than safe neighbourhoods and one made sure to run only during the day; the other was more concerned with making sure he did nothing to 'look suspicious' while he ran. Another runner was more concerned with cars. She ran on the sidewalk when running with the app, but down the middle of the street when not using it. She speculated that she might do this because she is concerned about being hit by a car. Only one participant was concerned with the app's Zombie Link feature, which tracks one's run and gives players the option to share routes and times on social media. She was concerned not only with the fact that her approximate address, running time and regular route were being stored online, but also that the game would share her distance and time. She did not want others to know how fast she ran.

As far as an overall 'sense' of one's neighbourhood or closer feeling to the neighbourhood itself, evidence does not suggest this to be the case. In fact, one participant seemed to have less of a sense of community after he started running with the app. He reflected on feelings of superiority compared to non-running neighbours. The app works well as a disciplining agent, to get one out the door and involved in the community emplaced in the narrative. However, the app also works as an encapsulating device, encouraging players to focus more on the game place than the places they were actually running in. More interesting were the ways that participants saw their own use of the game in shared spaces. One of the participants remarked:

Running through the neighborhood is a fascinating experience. One is able to enjoy the post-apocalyptic scenario while at the same time holding the secret of enjoying the activity to oneself and separate from those you might encounter. It is a peculiar balance that the perception undergoes.

This participant is hinting at one of the very unique positions this app puts players in; one can play ZR without spectators knowing they are playing a game. Whether or not this perception matters to spectators, it is significant that players see it as a very different reality. These hyper-real environments work to make the run seem more real, but that sense of 'realness' connects with an awareness of the artifice that hyper-real spaces create.

Conclusions and implications

Conclusions

While ZR is a game, the narrative aspect is its most appealing feature and the narrative seems to be what individuals will continue to pay for as subsequent seasons come out for the app (Season 3 was released in April 2014). Likewise, individuals are invested in the hyper-real elements within the game. Six to Start, the company that makes the app, has already answered this in some respects, creating 'race day' runs that allow runners to run with zombies even during 5 km, 10 km and half marathon races. These hyper-real narratives are an element that needs further consideration as augmented apps continue to grow. This research shows that participants genuinely enjoy the aspects of the game that made it hyper-real while also acknowledging that the app constantly reminds them of the artifice. With a number of self-disciplining and motivational apps appearing on the market, covering anything from house cleaning to learning a foreign language, understanding the connection

between narrative and returning use would be helpful to both commercial and educational institutions.

While much of the research on locative media and mobile gaming has focused on the magic circle, ZR as a game does not break down issues of the magic circle as optimistically as researchers might believe. While the app breaks some notions of a magic circle, the individual is still attached to and encapsulated in a gaming device, just a small one enough to fit in one's pocket. While others would not be sure of whether or not an individual was playing a game in a public space, runners actually have very little interaction with their own communities while playing the game. Players might know the geographical layout of their neighbourhoods better, but the technology does nothing to make one feel part of a real community. This does not mean that other augmented apps cannot create this experience, only that this game does not aid in a sense of community. Where the game better addresses discussions of the magic circle is in the awareness that players have that they are creating a playful space that others might not be aware of.

Whether or not runners consider running as a performative act for which they can utilize rhetorical strategy is a complex question. All five runners noted that, in line with De Certeau, they move around their neighbourhoods with little thought to the laws that dictate motor traffic – such as stop signs, one-way roads or red lights – outside of checking to make sure they would not be hit by a car. One runner admitted to running through intersections if she knew cars had time to stop for her. Several runners felt as though the neighbourhoods they ran in were not made for runners and that they had to use the space in different ways in order to run, agreeing with Topinka's argument that twentieth- and twenty-first-century spaces in general are not made for pedestrians. Likewise, runners were asked to make decisions about their actions to balance the space they were in with the desire to play through the game. This manipulation required them to make choices and run unexpected routes. The game appears as a collaborator in designing the runner's daily run. Participants commented on how they collaboratively worked with the app and that a run was something that they could edit and modify to the purposes of the situation. Two runners acknowledged an awareness of being observed by others. One participant mentioned: 'When I do run, I see some people just kind of watching . . . if they had the opportunity of learning what the app is and what it does, they might take the chance to get it and use it.' This participant shows not only that he is aware of running in his neighbourhood as performance, but also that it was a performance that could be used to encourage others to be active.

Some runners see the way that the app rewrites their neighbourhoods in their own imaginations. One runner reflected on how the narrative affected his perceptions of physical spaces within his neighbourhood:

What had been a mundane driveway can, within the narrative, become an area that housed a rather dramatic event. It remains a driveway, obviously, but when considering the space, even when no longer participating with the app, the memory of the event that took place during the narrative remains, and the space is transformed by way of your experience of it.

The participant highlights the very question of whom an app like this rewrites the space for. If something traumatic happens within the game, a beloved character dies, a particularly challenging zombie chase, or even a happy moment in a favourite mission, the space that that narrative point happens in becomes haunted by the event. Walking past that space may remind someone of the event in the way that visiting a childhood space might remind one of a life event. For the individual playing the game, the physical location is forever rewritten by the game.

Implications

Zombies, Run!'s success as well as further advances in augmented and GPS technology will lead to other games being produced. Six to Start has come out with two other narrative-based fitness app since the success of ZR: *The Walk*, a step-recording with narrative similar to Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* and *Superhero*, an app where the protagonist must strength train to be Earth's last protector. As games that play with space continue to grow and improve, designers must be aware of how important well-constructed narrative is to the success of these kinds of games, especially if they are going to be used as disciplining agents. *Zombies, Run!*'s success is also, in part, due to its tapping into larger cultural phenomena. This work is of use to individuals hoping to build a greater understanding of how these texts work as well as programmers interested in making similar games. In general, as more mobile-based casual games continue to play with notions of fixity, these phenomena will warrant further study.

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