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Mobile games and ambient play

Larissa Hjorth and Ingrid Richardson

From *Tetris* and *Angry Birds* to location-based service (LBS) multiplayer games such as *Ingress* and gamified apps such as *Foursquare*, mobile gaming has changed dramatically in an age of smartphones. In this chapter we explore the notion of ambient play as a way to critically interpret the complex and diverse practices emerging from our mobile game practices. We suggest that ambient play enables a flexible and open approach to games and playfulness more generally, as it effectively incorporates the various ways we engage with and embody mobile games in our everyday lives, deliberately moves beyond the problematic ascription of the term ‘casual’ to mobile games, and conveys the way mobile media are part of a lusory sensibility in contemporary culture. In this chapter we consider the way mobile apps, services and games are embedded in our day-to-day lives, and suggest that we might effectively interpret such engagement as a type of ambient play.

Ambience is often used to describe the effects of sound and music, but has also been used in the discourses of computing and science, especially human computer interaction (HCI) (Dourish 2001; Bayliss 2007). As a noun, it specifically refers to a style of music with electronic textures and no consistent beat that is used to create a mood or feeling, but more generally the term describes the diffuse atmosphere of a place. There are many features

of gameplay that are ambient – most explicitly the soundscapes that play a pivotal role in developing the mood, genre and emotional cues for the player. And yet, like ambience, the importance of sound is relatively overlooked in games studies despite its pivotal role in player engagement and embodiment. What constitutes our sensorial involvement with mobile games – especially as they travel across different modes of presence, engagement, distraction, online and offline spaces, while potentially being on the move – indicates that a more robust and expansive understanding of ambience as a mode of gameplay is required.

Ambience is thus not only – or even primarily – an aural experience, but also discloses a game's texture, affect and the embodied modality of the player. As we have argued in other work, interpreting mobile gaming as ambient play 'contextualizes the game within broader processes of sociality and embodied media practices' and defines play as something that takes place both in and out of games, reflecting broader cultural nuances and phenomena (Hjorth and Richardson 2014, 60). Ambience also conveys the way games infiltrate our social and emotional lives, afford particular sense perceptions and impact upon our movement through domestic and urban spaces. All of these things work to diversify our experience of co-presence, of being-with-others; indeed, co-presence in its various forms and combinations is an important part of the ambient texture of gameplay and is what makes online games so compelling.

In order to address the notion of ambient play as central to the motivations and meanings ascribed by players to gamified and lusory media, this chapter examines some key issues at play. First we reflect upon the relationship between place and movement with special consideration for play as part of broader embodied practices (Pink and Hjorth 2013). As we argue, in order to understand ambient play we need to situate it within broader entanglements of location and place that are always in motion. Just as ambient play draws on a sense of embodied practice as part of broader social and sensorial experiences in-the-world, this chapter reflects upon how we might situate ambient play within broader place-making practices and culturally inflected habitudes.

The chapter then explores the idea of plural co-presence as a productive rubric for conceptualizing the various modes of being-with that are manifest within everyday life. Co-presence can be experienced as spatially and temporally dispersed, across online and offline, here and there, now and then. Here we consider co-presence as an important aspect of our perception and negotiation of ambient intimacy and mobile play. In this section we also investigate notions of play beyond the 'game/play' conflation often found in discussions of games. We argue that central to the logic of mobile games has been their degrees of ambient play; that is, the way they enable a reflection of

inner subjectivities, resonate within and around the interstices of the everyday and generate multiple forms of engagement, distraction and reflection. We then consider how the rise of smartphone apps amplifies particular forms of embodied engagement in the form of ambient play.

Ambient places: Locating the mobile

Ambient play reflects and embeds the ambience of place. In other words, ambient play is a term that describes the significant and yet often tacit, unofficial and incidental forms of creativity, play and communication that surround mobile gaming practices in situ. The convergence of mobile-, social- and location-based gaming expands the possibilities for ambient play across a variety of everyday contexts. In a world that is increasingly 'appified' (i.e. mobile apps available for an increasing range of life activities) and gamified (i.e. the interweaving of game principles into non-game contexts) it is important to acknowledge the spaces of unofficial play – often unscripted, fluid and intrinsic to existing social networks – that reside within and around the more formal modes of gaming.

People and things have always been mobile – that is, *in movement*. As theorists within human geography mobility studies have argued, motion is our primary ontological condition. Doreen Massey argues: 'you can never simply "go back", to home or to anywhere else. When you get "there" the place will have moved on, just as you yourself will have changed' (2005, 124). In this sense the concept of movement offers a way of understanding how both our 'being-in-the-world' and the lived environment is fundamentally dynamic and mutable. Anthropologist Tim Ingold has written about movement of this kind using the trope of the line (Ingold 2007), arguing that we need to develop an understanding of place as that which is always in motion. In order to do so, Ingold redefines the notion of 'locations' as a series of places-to-places that are always in movement with trajectories entangled across various modalities of perception and affect. Within mobile communication, theorists such as Amparo Lasén have from the outset articulated the relationship between movement and emotion (2004), pointing to the way mobile media devices operate as repositories for the emotional and intimate. As Lasén notes:

Mobility is part of the original sense of the notion of emotion as it refers to agitated motion, mental agitation or feelings of mental agitation. Emotions are those mental states called 'passions' in the past. An important feature of the affects depicted by the category of passions is the idea that they

entail ways of being acted upon, of being moved by other beings, objects, events, and situations. Nowadays people are moved and acted upon by their mobile phones. Mobile phone uses are the result of a shared agency. (Lasén 2004, n.p)

As both a symbol and set of practices, mobile media are distillations of contemporary forms of intimacy and mobility (Fortunati 2002; Lasén 2004). Leopoldina Fortunati and Jane Vincent have made this important connection between movement and emotion and suggest that this is why mobile phones have been so successful as repositories and vehicles for intimacy and affect (2009). This link – that is, the marriage between movement and emotions – is important when thinking about ambience. Whether through sound or through haptic effect, the ambience of a game is its ability to traverse inside and outside the official game-spaces, weaving emotion and affect through our embodied experience of play.

Placed against this backdrop, where movement and emotion are intrinsically interwoven in mobile media use, we see ambient play as a key modality of mobile gaming through the negotiation and enactment of mobility, play, intimacy and co-presence. The concept of co-presence deliberately conceives of presence as a spectrum of engagement across multiple pathways of connection – and thus goes beyond counter-productive dichotomous models of online and offline, here and there, virtual and actual. The concept also allows us to connect the contemporary with the historical in terms of the evolution of mediated intimacies. In particular, with the rapid rise of the smartphone touchscreen and app-based media ecologies we are seeing a plethora of new ways in which co-presence and the practices of place-making are managed and maintained. Since the emergence of iOS and Android devices, the convergence around social, mobile and locative media has been as rapid as it has been uneven, providing new platforms, contexts and media in which the politics and practices of mobility can be explored.

In order to understand the relation between mobility and play, we need to define place as part of what Massey calls ‘stories-so-far’ (2005) and see place-making processes as entangled across numerous modalities of presence. Increasingly place – as something lived and imagined, physical and yet psychological – has been further complicated by mobile media practice (Wilken and Goggin 2012). Mobile technologies highlight how domestication processes – especially in the form of ‘placing’ and various forms of co-presence (Richardson and Wilken 2012) – are increasingly occurring outside the physical locality of the home. They represent new relationships between home and away (Hjorth 2012). In their post-phenomenological discussion of place, Richardson and Wilken define the role of place within movement as a series

of 'placings' across a variety of states of presence: net, co, tele and absent, among others (2012). In this chapter, we reflect specifically upon co-presence and ambient play within the context of the mobile turn.

With the convergence of locative, social and mobile media, mobility and intimacy take on new significance in the negotiation of location and co-presence. In the next section we explore the entanglements of connected presence, ambient intimacy and mobile play. As noted earlier, understanding the complex dimensionalities of presence across various forms of intimacy and mobile play is essential to comprehending the nature of contemporary ambient play.

Co-presence, ambient intimacy and mobile play

Literature concerned with co-presence within mobile communication fields has flourished with the work of Christian Licoppe and Mizuko Ito and is a productive way of rethinking traditional binaries that are no longer adequate descriptors of everyday life. Binaries such as here and there, virtual and actual, online and offline, absent and present have been eschewed through mobile media practices. Moreover, the rubric of co-presence provides a broader context for understanding intimacy and mediation as something that is not only a late twentieth- or twenty-first-century phenomenon, but also an integral part of being social and human (Mantovani and Riva 1998). In this genealogy, intimacy has always been mediated, if not by technologies, then by memories and language. In this context we can see how mobile media co-presence enacts similar practices of 'distant presence' as the nineteenth-century postcard (Hjorth 2005; Milne 2010).

The critical interest in the concept of presence spans various disciplines such as cultural studies, media studies, anthropology and philosophy, among others. With the rise in computer-related disciplines such as HCI, CMC (computer-mediated communication) and mobile media, presence has again taken on a heightened importance to describe various states of embodiment and engagement across multiple platforms, screens and contexts. This has lead new media anthropologist Anne Beaulieu to argue that ethnography should be concerned with co-presence rather than co-location (2010). Broadly defined, in the current context, presence can be understood as referring to,

the degree to which geographically dispersed agents experience a sense of physical and/or psychological proximity through the use of particular communication technologies. (Milne 2010, 165)

While presence has always involved different types of mediation, with mobile media the plurality of presence becomes key to understanding the ways in which intimacy and a sense of place are negotiated. Previous studies by Richardson and Wilken (2012) apply a post-phenomenological or 'technosomatic' approach in an exploration of the 'complex and dynamic range of place interactions and differing modalities of presence'. Central to these engagements is the issue of distraction – that is: 'how our attention becomes divided when we speak on the phone, send or receive a text message, or play a game on the mobile' (Hjorth and Richardson 2011, 115). This occurs in ways that involve a canny and subtle form of 'environmental knowing' that is attuned to both the specific requirements of mobile gameplay while retaining a 'crucial peripheral awareness of one's spatial surroundings' (Hjorth and Richardson 2011, 115–16). As Aguado and Martinez (2014) point out, smartphones and tablets are now thoroughly embedded in habits of 'coordinated multi-screen use', further complicating the modes of presence we experience across devices, online and offline contexts, spaces and places. Thus we argue that, at a perceptual level, complex modalities of awareness are at play:

The 'sensing' of mobile communication and interactive media elicits an intimately audio, visual, sometimes haptic, 'handy' and visceral awareness, a mode of embodiment which demands the ontological coincidence of distance and closeness, presence and telepresence, actual and virtual. (Richardson 2005, n.p)

Yet although the role of mobile devices in amplifying playful moments has been identified by many scholars and, despite the importance of play in many facets of human life, the broader relation between mobile media and play has been relatively under-researched, with much of the attention housed in education (Sutton-Smith 1997), psychology (Csikszentmihalyi 1990) and game studies (Salen and Zimmerman 2004). This has led many to return to 'classic' play texts such as Huizinga ([1939] 1955) and Caillois (1961). However, Sicart's aforementioned text on *Play Matters* identifies the importance of play in all facets of life and thus engages play in a much more rigorous debate that moves across all disciplines (2014). As Sicart notes, while play involves rules, playfulness is about an attitude. And it is the playful attitude which is key to understanding contemporary culture especially with the all-pervasive rise in gamified media. As de Souza e Silva and Hjorth (2009) note in their discussion of location-based mobile games, the creative micro-resistances enacted by mobile media play can reveal complex nuances of presence and intimacy as they become interwoven

into our daily routines and communicative practices. It is this intermingling of quotidian life and playfulness, as it realized in our ongoing embodiment of mobile interfaces, that we call ambient play.

Ambient play, especially when enacted on our intimate and locative mobile interfaces, recontextualizes gameplay as part of our broader embodied experience of being-in-the-world. The concept also indicates the pervasiveness of play in everyday life, and so effectively works to break down other dichotomies, such as the distinction between casual and hardcore gaming (Richardson 2011; Taylor 2012). As Christensen and Prax note in their discussion of *World of Warcraft* (WoW) mobile apps:

The traditional/hardcore versus mobile/casual dichotomy was rooted in older technological forms. Moves from desktops to laptops to conventional mobiles and to smartphones for the purposes of gaming have all impacted understandings and definitions of gamers and games. (2012, 732)

Mobile games, epitomizing the logic of ubiquitous computing, mess up neat distinctions between online and offline, official and unofficial play. The magic circle is no longer adequate to describe the permeability of play within the context of mobile media. As Dourish and Bell note, it is important to engage with the intrinsic messiness of ubiquitous technologies (2011). Historically within game studies, the magic circle has frequently been adopted as a way to explicitly demarcate game from non-game elements and play from 'real-life'. Over the past decade, however, game theorists have questioned this overly discrete, deterministic and artificial notion of the magic circle from a number of different angles, arguing that we need a broader, messier and more flexible description of game parameters and practices. Castronova (2005), for example, uses the term 'porous membrane' to illustrate the enmeshing of game and non-game practices, while Taylor (2006) describes online gaming as 'play between worlds'. This boundary collapse is especially evident in mobile games and is in part due to the specific convergent qualities of mobile media. What we might call the ambient effects of mobile smartphones eradicate the notion of the magic circle. As Moore notes, 'magic circle' proponents would argue that:

. . . the player cannot 'play' *Angry Birds*, or *Tetris*, or *World of Warcraft* outside of the magic circle, and yet mobile media, pervasive web access and the participatory elements of popular culture suggest the boundary between the game world and the real world is not only gossamer thin and permeated in both directions, but practically indistinct. (2011, 376)

The movement and blurring between online and offline spaces enacted by mobile gaming as part of its ambient playfulness, exemplify what Salen and Zimmerman (2004) call games' 'cultural environments'; that is, the context that encompasses both gameplay *and* the paratextuality that surrounds it. In this sense, we can see the erosion of the magic circle in the ubiquity of mobile play as part of a more expansive cultural turn. Together with our shift to mobile and its attendant app ecology, the emergence of user-generated or 'small media' content creation, participatory media and the proliferation of game elements in social media apps and services, have brought about a playful or 'lusory sensibility' en masse. In the following section we focus on the mobile app as an agent of ambient and paratextual play.

App ecology and ambient play

Since 2008, which marked the opening of the App Store, mobile applications have broadened the spectrum of mobile gaming to include playful social media and location-based apps and services. In mid-2013 Apple counted down to the 50 billionth download, while Google Play counted 48 billion; as listed in the App Store, most of the twenty-five top-paid apps are games. Like being 'online', playing games has become normalized, along with numerous other app-based activities. This playfulness is both intrinsic to the consumption of apps and participatory media, but also embedded in the very process of innovation and development; as Goldsmith notes, a global survey of 5,000 mobile game developers 'found that revenue was a goal for only 50%, with creativity or sense of achievement a motivation for 53% and the "fun of building an app" motivating 40%' (Goldsmith 2014, n.p.).

As Aguado and Martinez (2014) note, mobile app ecologies have worked to render the category of media entertainment ambiguous, such that there is a collapse of content categories across images, videos, music and games, and cross-fertilization of modes of engagement, including creative content production, social networking and play. This is evidenced, for example, by ringtone editing apps, photo-sharing apps and services such *Instagram* or *KakaoStory* and the integration of 'game elements' into location-based social networking apps such as *Foursquare* (Frith 2013). The acquisition of *Instagram* by Facebook in April 2012 (Goldsmith 2014) is an indication of this kind of hybrid media environment and the infusion of playful photographic practices and creative applications into social networking activities and services. With the ecology of apps, the consumption of entertainment frequently involves not only the invocation of information, but also the evocative, affective and sociocultural processes of creativity and participation in quotidian life. Thus for example the *N app* is:

A free app including three songs that allow the user to interact with them changing lyrics, instruments or singers involving direct interaction, GPS location and time of the day. The user can thus create his or her own versions of the songs, exploring a wide number of possible combinations as the songs adapt to the daily routines of the user. (Aguado and Martinez 2014, n.p)

As Aguado and Martinez argue, mobile media – through the growth of applications – lie behind ‘a re-definition of the very nature of entertainment content itself’. The integration of mobile apps, the web and traditional media involves a merger of media consumption (conventionally, watching and listening) with both the interactivity of participatory digital media and the personalization and intimacy of social networking services and social media.

Although mobile games are often problematically categorized as casual games, as Keogh notes: ‘a casual game does not simply offer an easier or more shallow experience than a traditional video game, but an experience that is more flexible with the player’s time, more easily incorporated into the player’s everyday life’ (Keogh 2014, n.p.). It is this flexibility and ease of incorporation, especially when adapted to mobile social media games or involving the insinuation of game elements into an application or service, which so thoroughly instills mobile games into the routines and habits of our social lives. For Frith, the way that mobile apps interweave digital and physical information to create hybrid spaces impact upon ‘spatial legibility’ or the way urban environments appear as ‘coherent and recognizable’ patterns (2013, 250).

In mobile–social–locative services such as *Foursquare* and *Jiebang*, this new spatial legibility takes a playful turn. The playful locative media service *Foursquare* has a purported 30 million users and combines GPS functionality, location tracking, navigational maps and user-generated first-hand recommendations of ‘the best places to go’ (a palimpsest of personal mini-narratives of place) that can also intersect with friend networks and consumer rewards. In his study of *Foursquare* players, Frith explores the effect of the ‘ludic layer’ (257) within *Foursquare* and how the service effectively turns ‘life into a game’ with the incorporation of digital game elements into the physical experience and traversal of place (249). In this way, *Foursquare* can both ‘encourage mobility and provide new ways to construct identity through location-sharing’ (Frith 2013, 257). The spatial legibility specific to *Foursquare* prioritizes the end destination over the pathway; that is, the ambient sharing of specific sites or places (cafés, bars, libraries) rather than the navigational nuances particular to one’s pedestrian or vehicular journey.

And yet, as seen in the case of the LBS *Jiebang* in China, against the networked destination focus of the gamified *Jiebang*, respondents use camera phone photo-taking and sharing to emphasize the importance of movement through different localities and temporalities (Hjorth and Gu 2012). The unofficial role of camera phone images soon became the main motivation for users, so much so that *Jiebang* rebranded itself to address this phenomenon. Through geo-tagging, temporality is highlighted, and through the aesthetics of the images, the ambience and flavour of the locations in movement are depicted. In the case of *Jiebang*, ambient play – that is, the intertwining of co-present intimacies through emotional textures of embodied play – motivates the various unofficial forms of playfulness that ‘realize’ the game in new ways unintended by the designers. As is typical of mobile media, users often take up applications in ways that are unconceivable for the makers, but it is this unruly creative adaption on behalf of the user that brings culturally specific affectivities and socialities to the interface.

Conclusions: Playing in the background of life

In this chapter we have explored the notion of ambient play as integral to the messy logic of mobile games as they move across physical, geographic, electronic, technological and emotional domains. Moving away from notions of the magic circle towards an idea of ambient play allows us to think through this complex socio-somatic weave within the messy space of ubiquitous technologies. Through the rubric of ambient play as the intrinsic and affective texture of mobile gaming, we have sought to think through a notion of ambient as not simply or primarily aural, but as thoroughly embodied, situated and social. This chapter has sought to develop a flexible apprehension of these multiple forms of engagement and embodiment beyond the inadequate notion of ‘casual’ play and its conflation with mobile games. Instead we have forwarded the idea of ambient play as a way to articulate the messy logic of games, creativity and play in contemporary mobile and participatory media culture.

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