Chapter 9

Location-Based Mobile Storytelling

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ABSTRACT

This article describes an investigation in location-based mobile storytelling entitled Tracking Agama. Using a combination of SMS messaging, voice calls, and web log entries, Tracking Agama leads its participants on a narrative-based exploration of Los Angeles, in pursuit of a fabled urban researcher, “Agama.” Participants use a bit of detective work to discover the keywords allowing access to Agama’s voice-activated and phone-accessible audio diary entries; send and receive SMS messages from Agama and his assistant; and receive calls from the virtual characters.

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LOCATION-BASED MOBILE STORYTELLING

Tracking Agama invites players to experience downtown Los Angeles like never before, perhaps even for the first time in their lives. This project was designed with the intention of getting people out into a city that often goes unexplored or overlooked, even though it is full of so many hidden treasures. Players are asked to interact with a narrative and become part of a puzzle that will lead them through both new and familiar places, and to experience them in unexpected ways. Mobile technology offers us a platform to do this. Our ultimate goal is to get people out of their cars, into the downtown area, away from their daily routine, and maybe even ride public transportation. Los Angeles often becomes synonymous with Hollywood, actors, cars and traffic, even though so much of Los Angeles history is rooted in the downtown area. We’ve focused on a few downtown locations, integrating an intriguing narrative, urban legends and historical information with the hopes of offering a new kind of experience to our
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players—one in which our players will look upon their city differently, exploring its layers of fiction, myth, history, architecture and topography.

BACKGROUND

Perhaps the best known mobile experiences are the pervasive games designed by Swedish company It’s Alive! and the British group Blast Theory. Botfighters (It’sAlive), in many ways, is very similar to a video game like Halo, but based on live action and played in the real world. Location information, referencing a fictional future world, and game play battles are handled through the mobile phone, and with a periodically updated web-based backstory offers new missions and recontextualizes game world developments. Blast Theory’s projects, including Uncle Roy All Around You and I Like Frank among others, work like cooperative treasure hunts with online and street players having access to different elements and developing cooperation strategies via SMS messaging. These projects are distinctly games, both in terms of their marketing and the structure of the experience they offer their participants. And while they contain story elements to offer a more complete imaginative world, these features are secondary to the gameplay.

With their procedural and participatory environments oriented around spatial exploration, these mobile games fit new media theorist Lev Manovich’s contention that, in the new cultural order, database is the primary structuring device, subordinating narrative to a secondary (and competitive) role. Spatial annotation projects, such as Yellow Arrow, [murmur], and Urban Tapestries, also seem to privilege a database structure. These projects allow the participant to author personal diary-like episodes into the database of materials, available to future navigators of the same urban terrain. Again, much like the pervasive games of It’s Alive! and Blast Theory, these projects have story elements mixed in their database structure and exploratory method of participation. All of these projects, though, seem distinctly different from the story experience of a novel or film.

We can turn to film theorist Edward Branigan’s narrative schema and modes of collecting and understanding data to understand how these pervasive games and spatial annotation projects utilize narrative components. Branigan suggests that a narrative is comprised of a series of episodes put together as a focused chain. An episode contains all that happens to a character in a particular place or time and a focused chain of episodes exhibits a clear continuing center. These mobile experiences, though they might contain some combination of episodes, unfocused chains and focused chains, would fail the Branigan test as a complete or complex narrative structure in a traditional conception of narrative (though the episodes and unfocused chains of events are narrative-like and the back-story would qualify as a simple narrative). Botfighters represents an example, similar to many video games, in which a computational structure works in tandem with narrative or narrative-like components to create the complete experience.

As our interest was in mobile storytelling, we looked for other projects that seemed organized around this principle. The GPS-enabled, tablet-PC based mobile project 34N118W shares the database structure exhibited by these mobile games but introduces specific fictional stories as the primary data element encountered by the participant. Here, the specific focus is on the participant encountering fictional stories related to a small neighborhood, rather than scoring points, shooting “enemies,” or listening to widely divergent personal anecdotes. The grid of the downtown area contains the data set—a combination of recorded text and visual correlations. The participant serves as the search engine, walking through this grid of data elements, encountering them in the sequence of his or her own choosing. In this way, 34N118W shares the characteristics of the digital environment outlined above in terms of the mobile games. The tablet PC