Chapter 15

Socio-Spatial Relations in Mobile Gaming: Reconfiguration and Contestation

Paul Martin

University of Nottingham, Ningbo, China

ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the opportunities of mobile games to critique and constitute the networks of which they are a part, attending particularly to location-based games. It discusses how these kinds of mobile games reconfigure people’s relationships with other people and objects in their environment. In order to understand this reconfiguration, a model is put forward that clarifies the various ways in which people and objects are presented to the mobile game player. Using this model, examples are discussed of games that make interactions available that are disruptive of a social or political order, arguing that this disruption may be drafted into socio-political critique. Other examples demonstrate how mobile games bring everyday life within a capitalist logic, monetizing leisure and the mundane. This suggests that mobile gaming as a technology, practice, or product is neither fundamentally emancipatory nor fundamentally regressive but rather can be employed in various ways.

INTRODUCTION

In their 2005 white paper, the International Game Developers Association (IGDA) defined mobile games as those that ‘are delivered via wireless networks to devices whose primary function is a mobile phone’ (Wisniewski et al., 2005, p.4). Since the release of the iPad in 2010, the term has tended to include tablet devices too. In most game review websites, such as IGN, Eurogamer and Edge, as well as game developer website Gamasutra, the term essentially refers to games for operating systems such as the iOS and Android, whether they are played on tablets or smartphones.

This definition distinguishes the mobile from other kinds of digital game platforms; consoles, such as Microsoft’s Xbox, that are linked up to TV screens; dedicated portable, or handheld, gaming devices such as Sony’s Vita; and multifunctional PCs. There are two distinctions here: the player can access mobile games in a range of places and times and mobile game platforms – mobile...
phones – are not primarily designed or purchased for gaming.

The first of these distinctions seems most important. The fact that players can play in different locations, move between locations while playing, and that games can register these movements and incorporate them into gameplay is of particular relevance to the way the games discussed here reconfigure, contest and reinforce socio-spatial relations. Not all mobile games do register player movement through the world. Many popular mobile games take advantage of the mobile phone’s ubiquity without taking advantage of its ability to locate and track player movements. This chapter will focus on games that do register player mobility as it is in these mobile games that some of the most interesting socio-spatial reconfigurations occur.

The second distinction is also relevant. The fact that mobile phones are multi-functional means that far more people own mobiles than portable gaming devices such as the Vita. This situates mobile games in a very different network of possible players. Certain game forms that could not work on portables can work on mobiles, for example games such as Ingress (Niantic Labs, 2012), discussed later in the chapter, which require a critical mass of players to function. Games that function by disrupting players’ everyday routines, such as Mogi: Item Hunt (Castelli, 2003), require a platform that is always with the player. People who own mobile phones usually carry them around with them (Mainwaring, Anderson, & Chang, 2005, p.278) but, since portable gaming devices are usually slightly bulkier than mobiles and only serve one purpose, people are less likely to routinely carry portables about (Tassi, 2012; Totilo, 2012).

While some of the following argument could be made in relation to portable gaming devices, there are substantial differences in the socio-spatial relations that the two platforms make possible.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Socio-Spatial Relations and Political Critique**

Over the last 30 years there has been a sustained academic interest in the importance of space in shaping social and political relations and the ways in which the spatial is shaped by political, ideological and economic interests (for a summary, see Warf & Arias, 2008). Two of the most influential texts in this spatial turn are Henri Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space* (1991), and Michel de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984). The former argues that space is socially produced and is integral to the reproduction of social relations. The latter provides a blueprint for thinking about how the use of space by ordinary people could challenge, resist and perhaps undermine the spatial regimes that are imposed by the powerful and that serve to maintain existing structures of power. This shaping of the character of space from above and below is sometimes termed *spatialization*.

This central idea – that space is produced by and productive of socio-political relations and that people’s practices in space are capable of contesting these relations – has been central to much work in cultural studies, particularly as it relates to urban practices such as skateboarding (Borden, 2001) and graffiti (Bowen, 2013). The mobile phone – like the skateboard or the spray-paint can – is a potential tool through which certain spatial practices can be enacted that realise or challenge existing configurations that are simultaneously spatial, social and political. This simultaneity means that these aspects – the spatial, the social and the political – are mutually constitutive. Take the example of a city train during rush hour. The spatial refers to the relationship between people and objects in space: the number and arrangement of seats, the placement of doors, the number of passengers. But the spatial is also socially constituted, determined in part by the social conventions by which people abide in this social situation: the