Chapter 3

Mobility, Liminality, and Digital Materiality

Martin Rieser
De Montfort University, UK

ABSTRACT

This chapter will examine and critically align a number of pioneering projects from around the world, using mobile and pervasive technologies, which have challenged the design and delivery of mobile artworks, as documented on the author’s weblog and book The Mobile Audience (Rodopi, 2011). These will be presented together with examples from the artist’s own research and practice, which have been concerned with the liminal nature of digital media and the intersection of the real and virtual, the physicality of place, and the immateriality of the imaginary in artistic spaces. Two projects in process are also referenced: The Prisoner—a motion-captured, emotionally responsive avatar in the round—and Secret Garden—a virtual reality digital opera. Lastly, this chapter considers the nature of digital materiality in the exhibition of miniature Internet transmitted sculptures: Inside Out: Sculpture in the Digital Age.

THE PARADIGM

As computing leaves the desktop and spills out onto the pavements, streets and public spaces of the city, we increasingly find information-processing capacity embedded within, and distributed throughout the material fabric of everyday urban space. Ubiquitous computing evangelists have heralded a coming age of an urban infrastructure, capable of sensing and responding to the events and activities transpiring around them. Imbued with the capacity to remember, correlate, and anticipate, this near-future “sentient” city is envisioned as being capable of reflexively monitoring its environment and our behaviours within it—becoming an active agent in the organization of everyday life in urban public space. However, beyond such techno-utopianism, the use of mobile
code-based technologies can give new agency to the public, and create a distinctive meld of embedded history and imagination, which in the urban projects described in this chapter, represents a very different form of ‘sentience.’

Our mental representations of cities are necessarily complex, and to me it seems problematic for artists to merely map literal representations back onto space using locative technologies, but this appears to have been the predominant practice of many early projects, such as the first Locative Media workshop1 and Urban Tapestries2. Research into spatial representation shows how mental maps create subjective distortion, describing not space, but the objects or nodes in it, and so our inner representations appear to be a direct contradiction to the continuous Euclidian ‘space between’ of a (Google) map, which is the dominant trope of the age of GPS (Tversky, Kim, & Cohen, 1999). Many of my own and the other projects considered here are an attempt to view the city as a series of social markers, landmarks and imagined human presences, rather than as simply abstract representations of space.

In current artistic interventions deploying locative technologies, there exist two distinct domains of practice—one that engages the “digital tame” of social media, online consumer culture and easy post-Situationist urban interventions, and another, which critically interrogates the digital “wild” by considering the liminal: the marginal and the excluded, both in fact and imagination.

While media arts using locative tools have naturally gravitated towards urban environments and have been drawn from either game or Situationist strategies, this chapter will develop a theory and practice of situated and embodied arts related to a broader spectrum of ambulant and location-based practice making use of the new digital affordances. This chapter will discuss how particular artworks that use technologies such as GPS have transformed landscape from a “picture” to a multi-layered, multi-channel experience, often incorporating multiple sense modalities and extending beyond the instant into a highly durational, expanded spatio-temporal field. This field may reconnect the human experience of landscape, through the newer opportunities provided by mobile technology, to its very long artistic and cultural traditions. My use of Liminality also refers to the increasingly shaded edge area between virtual and physical experience, as well as the sense of ‘otherness’ or the uncanny, engendered by technologies of this kind.

LOCATIVE ART

Karlis Kalnins coined the phrase ‘locative media’ as the title for a workshop hosted by RIXC, an electronic art and media centre in Latvia during 2002. Whilst locative media is closely related to augmented reality (reality overlaid with virtual reality) and to pervasive computing; locative media concentrates on social interaction with a specific place through mobile technology. Hence, many locative media projects have a background in social, critical, or personal memory. In this chapter, I will describe attempts to use location-specific media in narratised contexts, both as a researcher’s tool and a way to bring contemporary stories alive for the new technologically driven public.

Much reflection on Locative media art has been premature, for as Drew Hemment observes:

*It is too early to offer a topology of locative media arts, however, or to tie the field down with strict definitions or borders... We have not yet reached the point at which the technology disappears—all too often the tendency is to focus on the technology and tools rather than the art or content.*

The waters have been further muddied by the convenient way in which artist’s projects have often aligned with the consumer research interests of the mobile phone companies, where yesterday’s locative project becomes tomorrow’s “killer app.” Mike Liebhold of the Institute for