The place of mobile gaming: one history in locating mobility in the Asia-Pacific region.

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ABSTRACT

In media cultures of late, the synergy between two global dominant industries – mobile communication and gaming – has attracted much attention and stargazing. As part of burgeoning global media cultures, gaming and mobile media are divergent in their adaptation at the level of the local. In some locations where broadband infrastructure is strong and collectivity is emphasized (such as South Korea), online multiplayer games prevail. In locations where convergent mobile technologies govern such as Japan, mobile gaming platforms dominate.

In order to address the uneven adoption and definitions of mobile gaming – that range from encompassing casual mobile games to pervasive (location aware) gaming – this paper will attempt to sketch how we can think about mobility, and mobilism, in a period marked by divergent forms of regionalism and localization. Drawing from cultural studies, anthropological and sociological accounts of mobility and emerging consumer practices in the region, this paper seeks to move beyond current conflations and futurism surrounding convergent mobile gaming.

KEYWORDS

mobile gaming, mobility, Asia-Pacific region.

1. INTRODUCTION

The notion of mobility, like play, is inflected by the local. As a region, the Asia-Pacific is marked by diverse penetration rates of gaming, mobile and broadband technologies, subject to local cultural and socio-economic nuances. [29] This makes the region a compelling case study for both gaming and mobile technologies. Both media are entrenched in the social and local. In this convergence, discourses around gaming and mobile communication could learn a lot from each other to become part of a media archaeology. [15] [21] As Jussi Parikka and Jaakko Suominen compelling study on a 'cultural history of mobile games and the experience of movement' demonstrates, there is a need to move away from histories of computing and relocate both mobile gaming and electronic gaming in terms of cultural histories. [28]

In the world of mobile gaming, contesting definitions and beliefs prevail. This has to do with the fact that in an age of globalization, localization is a tenuous force. [31] As social, cultural, economic and technological convergence conflates with globalization, processes of localized disjuncture are inevitable. [17] The diversity of the region is clearly demonstrated by the bipartisan definition of mobile gaming in Seoul (South Korea) and Tokyo (Japan). As two defining locations are seen as both "mobile centres" and "gaming centres" to which the world looks towards as examples of the future-in-the-present. Unlike Japan, which pioneered the *keitai* (mobile) IT revolution and mobile consoles such as playstation2, South Korea – the most broadbanded country in the world – has become a centre for MMOs (online massively multiplayer) games played predominantly in the social space of PC rooms (*PC bangs*).

Adorned with over 20,000 *PC bangs* in Seoul alone and with professional players (Pro-leagues) making over a million US dollars per year, locations such as

Situated Play, Proceedings of DiGRA 2007 Conference

South Korea have been lauded as an example of gaming as a mainstream social activity. With the world's best broadband rates and arguably the most robust examples of governmental and industry synergies around new technologies, [27] South Korea has become synonymous with online multiplayer gaming. In a period marked by convergent technologies, South Korea and Japan represent two opposing directions for gaming – Korea emphasizes online MMOs games played on stationary PCs in social spaces (*PC bangs*) whilst Japan pioneers the mobile (privatized) convergent devices. These two distinct examples, with histories embroiled in conflict and imperialism, clearly demonstrate the importance of locality in the uptake of specific games and game play. As Brian Sutton-Smith [33] identified, game spaces are social spaces. These social spaces have histories that are imbued by the local.

The local impacts on what it means to be co-present. Co-presence can infer the traversing between the virtual and the actual, being here and there as is prevalent in the practice of mobile technologies and gaming spaces. For Doreen Massey [26] a sense of place is defined through representational processes, a practice that is always mediated. It is easy to romantically conceive of technology as the scapegoat for increasing feelings of dislocation in redefining place. But this can be too convenient and requires further analysis. As Massey notes, place has always been mediated – by projections, imaginings, representation and the very acts of practising culture and performing identity. Technologies such as mobile media re-enact earlier co-present practices such as SMS remediating 19th century letter writing traditions. As Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin [6] note, 'remediation' is a reworking of McLuhan's [23] argument that the content of new technologies is that of previous.

In new media discourses we can find many examples of the content or specters of the older media. Casual mobile gaming is a remediation of earlier media such as the game boy, reminding us of mobile media's privileging of such senses as aurality just like earlier domestic technologies such as TV and radio. However, new media is also different from previous media as Chris Chesher [8] eloquently describes in his vivid outlining of different visual regimes. According to Chesher, the genealogy from the cinema to the television and then console games could be traced as a shift from the gaze to the glance to the glaze.

However, one of the compelling features of mobile gaming is that it represents the bipartisan of views on mobility (especially electronic) and its impact on place. Casual mobile gaming suggests an extension of what Raymond Williams characterized as 'mobile privatization' [37]; while the potential corporeal and electronic synergies of pervasive mobile gaming suggest the indefatigable significance of place. Much of current location aware gaming highlights for users that co-presence is undoubtedly disjunctive with delay often winning out against the desired immediacy. As I have argued elsewhere, [13] pervasive gaming is the practice of one of the enduring paradoxes of mobility – the acrimonious marriage between immediacy and delay. That is, the wish for immediacy to have seamless co-presence is disrupted by the actual practice of delay through the haptic participation of place. In order to understand this phenomenon we need to reexamine what mobility and place means today.

2. *MOBILE LOCALITIES:* THE PLACE OF MOBILITY IN THE REGION

However, rather than announcing the death of place, ethnographies of localised mobile practices describe ways in which place has taken on new significance and importance. [18] [38] As Mizuko Ito's ethnography in Tokyo [18] [19] observed, young people used the *keitai* to facilitate and ensure further synchronization in face-to-face meetings. Kyongwon Yoon's ethnography in Seoul [38] showed how hand phone (*haendupon*) practices re-acted traditional socializing rituals and familial relationships. These ethnographies are but two studies of many that demonstrate that, mobile phones – as exemplifiers of ICTs – are bound to a sense of place and community.

It is easy to conceive romantically of technology as the scapegoat for increasing feelings of dislocation in redefining place. And the mobile phone has often bore the brunt of such anxieties. However, as Massey [26] notes, place has always been mediated – by projections, imaginings, representation and the very acts of practicing culture and performing identity. We re-enact earlier rituals such as gift-giving through emerging new textualities and vsiualities like SMS and MMS. [34] Domestic technologies [12] [22] [32] –

such as the television and the mobile phone – have been integral in constructing and traversing public space; however, they have also been part of the merging of public and private spheres, a phenomenon encapsulated by Williams's aforementioned notion of 'mobile privatization'. [37]

As Williams observed, 19th and 20th century technologies, from the train to the television, have been part of the way in which we have redefined space, and specifically public and private spheres. In an essay on 'mobile privatization' Williams characterized the 'unique modern condition' as 'an ugly phrase for an unprecedented condition'. [36] Utilizing the metaphor of car traffic, Williams describes people moving in their cars, insulated from the world, only communicating with people inside their car. Other cars get seen as 'shells' for which the occupants of the individual shells (cars) have no care or interest for. The metaphor of car traffic operates to characterize contemporary mobile privatized social relations.

This view of mobile communications exasperating fragmented social relations is not just highlighted by Williams. The work of Robert Putnam in his critical examination of the incline of social care and community in the US can been seen to further this negative view of technology in mediating and fragmenting social capital. [30] One of the most eloquent writers on this condition, sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, developed the term 'liquid modernity' [4] to describe transformation of once rigid social structures into fluid and contingent arrangements and renegotiations.

As Bauman notes, the vehicle for this liquid modernity is 'the smaller, the lighter, the more portable' [4]. He then elaborated upon this condition to speak of the role of mobile communication in relationships as 'liquid love' [3]; a state in which paradox governs our practices of intimacy in an epoch marked by technological co-presence. Here we see connectivity struggling, and competing with, the practice of actual contact. Both Putnam and Bauman's analysis have been quick to highlight the ambivalences and inherent disjuncture involved in the contemporary co-present practices exemplified by mobile communication.

David Morley has been less savage in his evaluation of the role of technologies in contemporary everyday life. Extending Williams's notion of 'mobile privatization' that was originally used to describe technologies such as television, Morley identities mobile communication as 'mobile privatization' par excellence. [24] As Morley suggests, '(i)f the Walkman is one 'privatizing' technology, then the mobile phone is now perhaps the privatizing technology of our age, par excellence. [25] The mobile phone, according to Morley, has further eschewed the boundary between public and private by no longer bringing the public into the private – as was the case for television – but by inverting the flow so that the private goes out into the public. [24] [25]

However, although the domestic (technology) may have *physically* left home it *psychologically* still resides what a sense of place and home means to the user. [35] In the case of online gaming in Korea, the locating of domestic takes the form of the *PC bang*; a 'third' social space between work/school and the home. [7] As sociologist John Urry observed in his analysis of the role of virtual mobility on actual mobility (i.e. travel), Urry eloquently argues that rather than technology mobility replacing physical mobility, it actually reinforces desires and needs to physically travel. The discussions surrounding place, mobility and identity are most exasperated in the arena of mobile communication, with often the mobile phone becoming a scapegoat for larger social issues. This is perhaps mostly due to general confusions regarding differences between mobility and mobilism, two concepts Kenichi Fujimoto is quick to differentiate.

In his vivid account of the rise of *keitai* cultures in Japan as part of broader socio-historical trends that can be mapped back to the 18th century, Fujimoto argues that current *keitai* cultures are characterized by a condition he describes as '*nagara* mobilism'. While *nagara* roughly translates to 'whilst-doing-something-else', mobilism, for Fujimoto, is the 'broader cultural and social dimensions such as malleability, fluctuation and mobilization'. [11] Unlike mobilism, 'mobility has tended to refer to functional dimensions of portability and freedom from social and geographic constraint'. [11] In sum, mobilism is tied to socio-geographic factors, whereas mobility infers transcendence, particularly around geographic constraints. In the case of mobile communication, we could argue that both

mobilism and mobility operate simultaneously and thus often confused and conflated in general debates.

How we conceptualize the role of various interrelated components of involuntary and voluntary mobility, in a period of globalization, is subject to localized definitions of place. The role of localizing and personalizing 'imagined' notions of home and place have dominated discussions about globalization and postcolonialism. As highlighted above in the work of Putnam and Bauman, often mobile technologies have been repositories for these debates. In the work of Bell, the role of symbolic role of the mobile phone as a tool for localization advances the mobilism/mobility debate. [5]

The rise in mobile media is also marked by the rise in particular modes of gaming in region. For example, Korea had nurtured networked MMO played in stationary social spaces such as *PC bangs*, while Japan has pioneered, extending the role of the Walkman, mobile convergent platforms such as portable PS2 and Nintendo DS. These two very distinct modes of practicing mobility – physical, virtual or both – in relation to gaming co-presence is linked to earlier notions of locality. These models do not fit comfortably within Western or Eurocentric precepts about modernity and individualism as performed through commodity material cultures today. Hence to understand the politics of mobility and game play necessitates an investigation of the rise of consumerism and identity in the region.

3. *CONSUMPTION@ASIA: CONSUMPTION AND PLACE IN THE REGION*

It is important to remember that the 'imagined community' of nation-state is also reflected in the artifice of regionality. As Benedict Anderson [1] argued, the emergence of what we understand as nation today in the region arose through processes of modernity such as the printing press. These processes eradicated the vernacular and dialect in favour for dominant languages. Arguably, today's mobile and Internet cultures are extending these formations, but instead there is an inversion. The vernacular, through the micro-politics of user created content (UCC) imaging communities, is becoming a dominant force in determining geo-political imaginaries. In the face of globality, regionalism emerges as a tenacious force. This is aptly characterized by Arjun Appadurai [2] in his conceptualization of locality and region as not entailing fixed geographic boundaries, but rather, a mutating and ever-evolving scape in the disjunctive flows of global objects, media and people.

The consumerist narratives and identities in Asia after the 1997 economic crash have lead to new and multiple forms of Asian modernities that cannot be viewed as a simple reworking or mutation of the nebulous condition or epoch called 'Western modernity'. Chua Beng-Huat [10] has succinctly discussed the political agendas after 1997 that sought to redefine consumption, as distinct from westernization, as a re-energizing of the economies both in terms of production and consumption.

It is after 1997 that consuming 'Asia' becomes big business bringing about shifts in the correlation between nation-state and cultural capital. For example, in 1980s and 1990s the region was the repository for J-pop (Japanese popular culture such as *manga* and *anime*) with locations such as Hong Kong and Singapore attaching much cultural capital to the consumption of these products. By 2001, this was superseded by the Korean wave (*Hallyu*) that swept across locations such as China, Taiwan and Hong Kong, moving onto the Philippines and Singapore.

Investment in South Korean cultural capital has become big business in the region from Korean dramas consumed in Hong Kong and Taiwan to Korean online multiplayer games consumed in China and Taiwan. Korean products such as film are now being consumed globally. Korea is also investing heavily in cultural and technological education ensuring that Korea is positioned globally for its innovation. Chua further asserts that today's imagined communities are indeed defined through the trans-Asian synergies of 'communities of consumers'. [9] In this sense cultural and technological education have become modes of consumption in the fast expanding consumer-based economies of the Asia-Pacific.

Writing after the economic crisis of 1997 in Asia, Chua identifies the growing role of consumption in the region that can no longer be 'subsumed under the mantle of production'. [10] The pluralist movements

of postmodernism and its alignment with active models of consumption have not, as Chua asserts, 'eliminated debate on the "morality" of consumption' [10]; but rather, there has been a reconceptualisation of the ideological implications of cultural productions and its relationship to nation-state and formation of subjectivity. Identifying government policies enforcing saving rather than expenditure (epitomized by Taiwan and Singapore) of pre-bubble burst Asia, Chua argued that older generations saw much of the conspicuous and egregious consumption by youth cultures as a form of 'Westernization'.

However, after 1997 and the associated economic crisis the region had to sublimate the '"traditional" morality of savings… in order to save capitalism in Asia'. [10] In this repression of traditional ideas of morality, Chua argued that Japan again became a technological centre that symbolized well-made products and, despite the antagonisms on behalf of some neighbouring countries due to Japan's imperialism historically, the consumption of Japanese goods was deemed much more favourable than the consumption of western commodities. The consumption of J-pop has been just one phenomenon in many now constituting the transnational consumer communities of the Asia-Pacific in which 'Asian' products dominate.

The constitution of the Asia-Pacific with Asian, rather than Euro-American, products has become part of everyday life. Pan-Asian cinema has become central to the region's communities; also becoming a source for a revisualization of Hollywood's film industry with multiple re-makes and odes to the significance of Pan-Asian film globally. Examples from the recent remake of Hong Kong's *Internal Affairs* (directed by Andrew Lau and Alan Mak, 2003) by Martin Scorsese (*The Departed* 2006) and Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill* (2003) series are but two of many examples. Chua goes on to assert that the region is now 'a mix of Japanese, Korean and Chinese-language pop cultures' that are part of the 'daily diet of media consumers in East Asia'. [9] In each location, one can find a different 'mix of dedicated consumers' that leads Chua to argue 'consequently, a network of transnational consumer communities, from active fans to occasional consumers, has emerged in the region'. [9]

Chua observes 'these transnational consumer communities exist "beneath" the official international relations in a region where traces of colonial histories and Cold War antagonism remain'. [9] While there exists transnational 'communities of consumers', Chua argues there are 'no structural avenues for these pop culture consumer communities to percolate upwards to intervene in the international processes'. [9]

However, I would argue that through mobile media and media commodities such as gaming we are seeing emerging unofficial imaging communities that will impact on official imagined communities and transnational synergies. One example would be the phenomenon of online multiplayer games, especially Korean (such as *MIR II*), in places such as China and Taiwan. These choices in commodities highlight national affiliations in which China has often chosen Korean over Japanese commodities. Here we see the identification with a commodity's nation of origin is overtly deployed in the case of the Korean wave. Through Korea's technological innovation, and the economic and political power it ensures, Korea has converted this into cultural capital both within and outside the region.

And yet despite the consumption and re-packaging of "Asia" both within the region and globally, the customizing convergence of mobile technologies is an overtly trans-Asian practice that does not translate easily outside the region. From the macro, political economy view, countries are aligning particular trans-Asian production and consumption practices of mobile technologies with a notion of national culture. From a micro level, mobile technologies, like gaming culture, are not viewed as disparate entities but, rather, part of an embedded practice of it means to be local.

4. *GAME OVER*: CONCLUSION

As Bo Kaupmann Walter observes in his apt analysis of pervasive gaming and the role of networks observes, such games 'raise questions about the notion of time in games'. [20] It is this concept of temporality which is pivotal to the possibility of this convergence, especially considering the ways in which mobile technologies are 'micro-coordinating time and space' [22] that inevitably resulting in paradoxes. And in the

case of location-aware gaming, they rely on an imagined notion of immediacy to which the reality is delay. Arguably, it is this paradoxical nature that needs to be considered as part of the aesthetics and practices of mobile gaming in the future. And this is where its strength, rather than weakness, lies. It reminds players of the boundaries, as well as the nuances, of place. It is also the very inherent contingencies of what constitutes "new" media. [6]

The remediated media histories that accompany mobile and gaming discourses are multiple and divergent. In the face of global rhetoric about convergent media such as mobile gaming, the local operates as a tenacious force. In this paper I have outlined one example of the way in which this new media is rehearsing older, remediated notions of place. By discussing some of the multiple ways in which mobility and mobilism operate with the constellation of identities or 'communities of consumers', [9] I have endeavoured to expand upon some of the background factors informing the multiple mobilities and gaming spaces emerging in the region.

Returning to my initial question as to why location aware mobile gaming seemed less prevalent in Asia despite the region demonstrating some of the highest broadband infrastructure in the world (as in the case of South Korea) and the pioneering of mobile technologies (as in the case of Japan with the Sony Walkman). Despite the region's burgeoning techno-nationalism and the growing commodification of "Asia" globally (as is the case of Hollywood's adaptation of Asian cinema), we see distinct forms of practicing consumption and production.

These formations, linking back to Chua's discussion of consumption in the region post 1997, evidence distinctive forms of modernity that cannot be equated with westernization. Here we are reminded of the localized nature of both play and mobility that continue to disrupt any homogeneous form of media archaeology or globalization. Play cultures mobilize the politics of the local, and localities mobilize various forms of play. By looking at the work conducted into mobile communication and mobile media, gaming can further take stock of what it means to be co-present in an age of global connectivity.

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