Mobile Virtual Realities and Portable Magic Circles

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Chapter Abstract:

Hybrid Reality Games (HRGs) such as Pokémon GO enable different approaches to embodied space that problematize traditional understandings of play. More recently, smartphones have become involved in the provision of a new kind of relationship with space, the space of Virtual Reality (VR). It is the intention of this exploratory chapter to examine Mobile Virtual Reality (MVR) as part of the continuum of mobile media, in the context of two related themes (1) physical distraction and (2) embodied space. This chapter will examine how this reassessment might concurrently provide new understandings of play's connection to the ordinary space of daily life, before expanding upon these issues within the broader context of the 'smartphone movement', and concluding with suggested directions for future research within the field.

Bio

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Following its release in July 2016, Pokémon GO became somewhat of a global phenomenon. The game involves players using their smartphones to physically search for Pokémon that can be found within their environment. Once a Pokémon has been discovered, players must perform several tasks on their handset to capture it. In contrast to earlier Hybrid Reality Games (HRGs) such as Mogi (2004) and Foursquare (2009), Pokémon GO is an augmented reality (AR) application. Through a combination of smartphone camera and display, Pokémon appear on players' screens as if they are a part of the "real" world, 'even if it is still a bit crude in phenomenological terms' (Licoppe, 2016: 2). While the positive effects of this HRG - namely that players might spend less time inside and more time outside - have been reported, the flipside of this discourse is more commonly publicised. Numerous accounts of accidents have emerged involving individuals who were so engrossed in the pursuit of Pokémon that they failed to take stock of their surroundings, in some cases having fatal consequences (Soble, 2016).

As a corollary to this, locative games are still very much entangled in earlier apprehensions about mobile phones reducing the importance of space (de Souza e Silva and Frith, 2010; Frith, 2014, 2015), and the fear this physical dislocation may lead to injury. Yet, HRGs like Pokémon GO also have the potential to deepen, or rather enhance, connections to place and space. Studies in this field have demonstrated that locative media can elicit new approaches to public environments and sociality (Humphreys, 2010), as well as new conceptions of embodiment (Evans and Saker, 2017) precisely through the connectivity they allow. An important element of Pokémon GO and the provision of a new kind of space is therefore the transition to a mobile web. For de Souza e Silva (2006) a mixture of smartphones and the mobile web has led to what she refers to as 'hybrid space'. 'This 'hybrid space' emerges when digital and physical spaces are joined, giving rise to new embodied experiences and social connections in place' (Saker and Evan, 2016: 2). Significantly, these

experiences are co-constructed through a confluence of digital locative information and the ambience of the city, which is neither temporally or spatially restricted.

For Hjorth and Richardson (2017) HRGs, such as Pokémon GO, 'are manifestly ambient, as they become embedded in our daily routines, pedestrian movement, and interaction with the familiar strangers populating our neighbourhoods and urban spaces' (5). However, in much the same way that smartphone camera applications can alter how place is communicated by allowing users to overlay images with faux-vintage filters (see Berry, 2014), HRGs don't simply insert themselves into the daily customs of players, but more significantly modify how these individuals approach their circadian lives (Saker and Evans, 2016). This observation is borne out of a growing body of research that has coalesced around smartphones, locative media and the mediation of physical spaces over the past decade or so (Berry and Schleser, 2014; de Souza e Silva and Frith, 2010; Wilken and Goggin, 2012). Locative applications and pervasive forms of play can adjust the mobility choices of users, transforming their experiences of place (Gordon et al. 2013) and in some instances turning 'ordinary life into a game' (Frith, 2013). As Hjorth (2014) rightly note, 'what constitutes mobile gaming has changed dramatically' (p.48). Likewise, so too has our understanding of play (Saker and Evans, 2016).

Conventionally speaking, the space of play has typically been theorised as somehow cordoned off from ordinary life (Caillois, 2001; Huizinga, 1992). This marked sense of separation is perhaps most famously aligned to the work of Huizinga (1992) and his proposition that play interminably takes place within the 'magic circle'. When considering HRGs from this vantage-point, the likes of Pokémon GO immediately present a different *kind* of play, one that involves a convergence of the two themes developed above in relation to the progression of mobile media, namely (1) physical distraction and (2) new embodied approaches to space. While issues surrounding HRGs and traditional understandings of play

are indeed illuminating, and have been discussed at length elsewhere (Evans and Saker, 2017; Saker and Evans, 2016), this isn't the focus of this chapter. Instead, what I am interested in exploring is how these two themes might be framed with the recent incorporation of virtual reality (VR) into smartphones, or mobile virtual reality (MVR) as I shall refer to it, and how this reassessment might concurrently provide an updated understanding of play and its connection to the ordinary space of daily life. In this vein, then, just as 'selfies' can be understood as 'a starting point to discuss self-reflexive and self-representation as a narrative within mobile filmmaking' (Schleser, 2014: 149), MVR is very much positioned here as being part of the same continuum of mobile media that comprises HRGs and AR.

Mobile Virtual Reality (MVR), physical distraction and embodied space:

In June 2014, Google released its first low cost virtual reality (VR) headset, the aptly named, Google Cardboard. With the aid of a fold-out cardboard viewer, users are effectively able to transform their smartphones into viable VR devices. This initial idea subsequently became the impetus for Google's more refined MVR platform Daydream, which fundamentally does the same thing for Daydream-ready phones. Suitable handsets can be placed inside Google's accompanying headset, the Daydream View, and then paired with a wireless controller that is replete with smart sensors that read physical movements and gestures. Moreover, '[during] IO 2017, the firm announced the well-reported rumour that it would be launching standalone Daydream headsets with select hardware partners' (Faulker and Osbourne, 2017). In terms of its commercial positioning, Daydream is very much presented as a tool of escape; as a way of leaving one's environment behind and being transported to somewhere more exciting. In terms of its suggested usage, Daydream ostensibly functions in the following ways. First, as a way of exploring new worlds, such as 'famous museums, far-away cities, other planets and

beyond'. Second, as a personal cinema, where users can watch 'films on a virtual big screen', as well as experience sports and concerts as if they were 'actually there'. Third, as a new and more immersive form of gameplay, where the controller puts players right into the action (Google VR, 2017). The multiple applications of MVR are presently being explored by a growing number of industries. In recent times, MVR has been diversely used to offer terminally ill patients the experience of being outside (Murphy, 2017), to extend the ambience of music festivals like Coachella (Locke, 2017), and to enable home buyers to take virtual tours of properties that they are interested in buying without the need to leave their home. At the same, stories have also emerged examining MRV's impact on public spaces (see Walker, 2015) and its penchant for leaving users potentially vulnerable to injury. A good case in point involves a well-publicised story of a man playing a MVR game on his morning commute to work (see Patel, 2017) and the commotion this caused with other passengers. Not only was this story widely reported, but it was done so in the context of embodied space and the fact the man in question was very much cut-off from his surroundings. So, what does this suggest about MVR usage and its relationship to space?

MVR evidently involves a different kind of engagement with space than earlier mobile devices. Studies in this context have examined the propensity of mobile devices to physically distract users from their immediate surroundings (De Gournay, 2002; Gergen, 2002; Katz and Aahus, 2002). Certainly, research has demonstrated that mobile phone usage can be linked to all manner of accidents in public spaces (Lamberg and Muratori, 2012; Stavrinos, et al. 2011), with injuries involving pedestrians either talk or texting on their mobile phones increasing since 2006 (Richtel, 2010). Because of this, a common tactic for walkers navigating any urban environment is to be vigilant of individuals who are too busy looking at their mobile phones than to notice that they are about to collide with an oncoming passer-by. While MVR involves physical effort of sorts, with head movement translated into

digital movement, alongside wireless controllers serving as a proxy for hand gestures and such like, mobility is nonetheless minimal. This is precisely because MVR necessarily prohibits users from seeing the physical space that surrounds them. Instead what they perceive is the digital vista simulated within their headsets. Correlatively, individuals are more likely to use MVR in those public spaces that are 'in-between-spaces', such as traveling on a train, where users can remain seated. In this vein, then, much like mobile media, MVR provides users with some degree of control over the interactions they might have. Not that this is a new thing. As de Souza e Silva and Frith (2010) point out, people have always attempted to control their immediate surrounding. Reading, for instance, allows the reader to pay less attention to his or her environment (Schilvelbusch, 1986), just as personal music players create personalised "soundscapes". In a similar vein, and as touched on above, HGRs like Pokémon Go are equally predicated on users' attention shifting between two different but interrelated activities. Yet, the affordances of MVR notably differ from these examples.

MVR usage doesn't implicate the senses moving between two different perceptions of space, both co-constructed through a confluence of physical and digital interactions. Instead, MVR usage revolves around a siloing and synthesis of the senses. The sights and sounds experienced by users are simulated within their headsets, while their physicality is effectually incorporated into the overall experience. Put differently, while HRGs involve the physical incorporating the digital, in this instance it is the digital that incorporates the physical. MVR, then, seemingly moves beyond de Souza e Silva's (2006) 'hybrid space', as well as Hjorth and Richardson's (2017) notion of 'ambient play', and towards something more anastomotic. The embodied space of MVR isn't centred on 'hybrid space' and the oscillation between differing modes of attention and distraction, but rather a physical experience that is better described as 'hybrid presence'. This hybrid presence occurs when MVR users occupy two different spaces that are ceaselessly experienced as being monistic. The virtual world doesn't

end until the headset is removed, nor is it divided. As a result, it isn't so much that MVR usage reduces the importance of physical space *per se*, but more significantly MVR attempts to remove the perception of physical space altogether. Symptomatic of this, surrounding discourses have begun to include apprehensions about the kind of physical vulnerability 'hybrid presence' might produce, as seen in the reporting of the man play MVR on his way to work, just as this form of embodied space equally suggests an updated approach to play which is significant in the context of mobile media and indeed HRGs.

For Evans and Saker (2017) a way of understanding the subject experience of HRGs, such as the location-based social networking site Foursquare, can be comprehended through their conceptual figure, the 'playeur', which builds on Humphreys' (2010) study of the mobile social networking site, Dodgeball, in conjunction with de Souza e Silva and Hjorth (2009) understanding of the flâneur and Luke's (2006) dystopian 'phoneur'. 'For the 'playeur' ordinary space is no longer simply 'ordinary', nor is it only a space of consumption, but is also playful and open to engagement' (Saker and Evans, 2016: 12). Accordingly, traditional boundaries between ordinary life and play are effectively challenged. In contrast to this, MVR involves a different interpretation of play's delineation from normal space. Ordinary space, from this position, isn't so much overlaid with play, but rather circumvented through a prioritising of the digital. In this vein, MVR does more than offer a window on the world; significantly MVR provides a digital doorway to myriad realms that can be playfully experienced at any time and in any place. In the context of the magic circles, then, MVR elicits an understanding of play that is necessarily distinct from ordinary space. When the headset is on, the outside world disappears, and there is something magical about this experience. Users are effectively able to carry multiple worlds in their pockets, which can be called upon, for instance, to transcend the distinct lack of space felt while traveling to work on a crammed train (see Walker 2015). While Huizinga's (1992) 'magic circle' might be

contested in the context of HRGs, then, it is nonetheless affirmed when examined through MVR.

Discussion:

Throughout this chapter, MVR has been positioned as a recent development within the field of mobile media that builds on surrounding themes of physical distraction and embodied space, just as it is part of the continuum of mobile devices and HRGs. As a way of beginning to understand the kind of embodied space MVR configures, I have suggested the notion of 'hybrid presence'. To be clear, 'hybrid presence' isn't built on differing modes of attention and distraction *per se*, but rather a process of anastomosis, and through this the siloing of the senses. Within the context of play, such siloing equally suggests another way of approaching this phenomenon and its connection to ordinary life. Whereas the likes of Pokémon Go challenges Huizinga's 'magic circle', MVR presents an approach to play that isn't so much experienced within the space of ordinary life, but rather through its denial. Because of this, questions should be asked about emerging divisions between public and private, as well as the phenomenology of this kind of physical experience, and its impact on sociality. While there isn't the space to adequately tackle these questions here, it is my intention that this chapter will serve as a suitable primer for future research in the area of MVR, just as it should help underline its place in the wider context of the 'mobile movement' (see Berry and Schleser, 2014).

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