Chapter 34
Mobile Engagement:
Dynamics of Transmedia Pervasive Narratives

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ABSTRACT

The evolution of mobile technologies with the capacity to act as conduits to narrative media has led to the emergence of increasingly transmedia and pervasive storytelling practices. This chapter interrogates a mobile phone-based pervasive drama, The Memory Dealer (Lander, 2010), and a focus group run with participants, focusing on two "shifts" within the performance: from internally focused narrative (via headphones) to externally focused narrative (via public speakers) and from an individual experience to a communal experience. By considering how The Memory Dealer's audience responded to such shifts, it becomes possible to consider the inherent nature of being "an audience" of transmedia narrative. It is argued that the experimental pervasive forms facilitated by mobile technologies raises the potential to critically re-examine the nature of media engagement and the technological, social, and cultural dynamics that shape and are shaped by that engagement.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most significant technological developments to occur in relation to mobile technology is its capacity to act as an access point for narrative media. Since the early 2000s, mobile telephones have not only become more complex in terms of computing power, but also in their capacity to act as a platform for film, television or gaming related texts. This technological convergence (Jenkins, 2006, p. 2) between mobile telephony and screen media has wider consequences for the social and cultural circulation and experience of media texts. This chapter will focus specifically on the experimental use of mobile technology in relation to fictional narratives and consider the implications of this experimentation on our understanding of the social dimensions of both mobile technology and narrative itself.

Engagement with narrative media has, until recently, been relatively singular and stable. Each narrative form has been associated with a specific set of social and cultural factors that distinguish them from each other. Film and television involved

moving images and sounds with little input from the viewer, watched in communal semi-private spaces and the home (see, for example, Morley, 1986; Carroll, 2003). Theatre brings the audience into closer contact with performers, privileging issues of liveness and presence (see Urian, 1998; Reason, 2004). Videogames prioritise 'interactivity', with the audience taking a direct role in moving the narrative forward (see, for example, Juul, 2004; Carr et. al. 2006). However the evolution of mobile technologies with the capacity to act as conduits to narrative media, has led to the emergence of increasingly transmedia and pervasive storytelling practices. By transmedia storytelling I refer to Henry Jenkins' (2006) model of 'a single narrative so large that it cannot be contained in a single medium' (p. 95; see also Evans, 2011). By pervasive I refer to a term beginning to gain currency within the study of human-computer-interfaces that refers to using mobile technologies to facilitate the bleeding of fictional narratives into real public spaces. With transmedia pervasive drama the established boundaries between narrative forms break down as different storytelling techniques, viewing contexts and modes of engagement are brought together into a single narrative experience.

This chapter will use *The Memory Dealer* (*TMD*), created by video artist Rik Lander, as a case study of experimental transmedia pervasive drama and a focus group run after its first public performance. *TMD*'s aim was to use mobile devices to create emotional engagement in a fictional narrative in public space. At the heart of the piece was a conscious attempt to explore the possibilities of mobile media technologies and the modes of engagement they encourage. Rather than act as an expositional drama, in which the audience are told events by a narrator or character, *TMD* acted instead as an 'experiential drama', in which the audience uncover the narrative as they take part in events themselves. This positioned the audience within the fictional diegesis in a more

direct way than is the case in more traditional narrative forms. The focus group discussion explored audience members' responses to the piece and the mobile technology at its heart and raised issues concerning the ways in which social and technological factors played out in terms of their experience as 'an audience'.

Transmedia pervasive dramas offer a particularly useful way to interrogate the nature of engagement with both mobile technologies and fictional narratives. David Beer (2012) calls on Slavoj Žižek's theory of 'cogito' to examine how mobile media can reshape an individual's relationship to the world around them:

We might begin by thinking about mobile media in relation to this vision of cogito, the 'empty' in-between spaces of everyday life that exist between the more clearly defined spaces of the home [oikos] and public spaces of the city, town or even village [polis]…We might, perhaps more significantly, imagine that mobile media also allow space to be redefined, transforming the clearly defined spaces of the oikos and the polis into the empty and less definable space of the cogito (p. 362).

Transmedia pervasive dramas fit into this reshaping, transforming 'in between spaces' into narrative-enriched spaces, layered, as we shall see, with fictional memory and meaning. At the same time, the portable and individual nature of mobile devices creates narratives that exist everywhere, layered onto the material world, sitting amongst the social and cultural practices of daily life. They ultimately offer experiences of both mobile technology and narrative that are highly distinct from their well established uses. Single narratives are now found across multiple media platforms and within multiple public and semi-private spaces, with each platform and space facilitating different kinds of narrative engagement. The nature of these narratives is explicitly tied up with the nature of mobile technology and the way that it

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