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Learning From Commercial Mobile Games

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While new media analysts insist that mobile games will "replace ringtones, logos and other mobile phone personalisation services as one of the key drivers of the handset market" (Finn, 2005, p.32; Edwards, 2006), it should come as no surprise that the North American game industry has been relentless in trying to capitalize on the buzz and hype surrounding mobile entertainment content. With a cell phone in hand, consumers today can take on the role of rap artist Lil Jon and participate in a game of "crunk golf" amidst the confine of an urban metropolis. Similarly, gamers can transform themselves, vis-à-vis their cell phones, into CTU agents and work alongside Jack Bauer in preventing a nuclear attack in *24*—a mobile game based on the popular television series.

Given the entertainment industry's mandate to protect its profit margin, the move to adapt existing and popular media content for the mobile screen is a logical, albeit predictable initiative. For example, the two game titles listed above do not only exploit the cultural currency of a hip-hop celebrity and a hit television show, but more importantly, they are also designed to fit within the "tried-and-true" genres of mobile games that support familiar gameplay[1], and are deemed profitable in the marketplace (IGDA, 2005, p.18).

As a member of EMU (Evaluation, Mobility and Usability), the evaluation arm of the Mobile Digital Commons Network (MDCN), a pattern that we have noted from our ongoing research and field trials is that habitual use of technologies will inherently frame public understanding of new media artworks.

[1] *Lil Jon Crunk Golf* is essentially a "hit the target" sports game, while *24* borrows gameplay strategies from various genres including action, puzzle, and racing games.

Since MDCN—a collective of designers, engineers, and social scientists, is currently developing an augmented game experience through the means of mobile technologies, this observation evokes two important challenges: first, how will the design conventions employed in commercial mobile games affect the reception and perception of mobile, location-based art project? And second, how can artists, designers and engineers, working from a non-profit standpoint, learn from these commercial entities in creating a more engaging and meaningful project for the public?

"There's long been a schism between art and popular culture" (Laurel, 2001, p.10). Using this tension as a starting point, the first part of the paper will define mobile games and locative media, and exemplify that while both categories have its unique characteristics, they also refuse any clear-cut distinctions. In establishing this framework, the second part of the paper will shift its analytical focus on to the commercial discourse of mobile games.

In North America, the current market commentary with regards to the future of mobile gaming is anchored by two extreme positions. Examining the overtly optimistic and pessimistic perspectives I contend that these bipolar positions are problematic because they do not consider consumer attitudes and perceptions towards cell phones, nor do they investigate how this prior knowledge can affect the uptake of mobile games. If a central mandate of the MDCN is to expand the potentials of wireless technologies, the intention underlying this analysis is to re-inscribe the users and their media habits—not as an afterthought, but rather as a dynamic component in guiding the development of both commercial games and location-based artworks. Understanding how people are interacting with the cell phone as both a communication tool and a gaming platform can facilitate artists, designers, and engineers in their attempts to conceptualize novel, mobile applications for a wider public (Berg, Taylor & Harper, 2003, p.1; Stringer & Toye, 2004, p.4).

In a general sense, mobile games can be categorized as any applications that are "delivered via wireless networks to devices whose primary function is a mobile phone" (IGDA, 2005, p. 4). Locative media, on the other hand can

operate on handsets, as well as other mobile devices such as laptops or GPS. These projects tend to exploit and integrate the location-aware and networked capabilities of mobile technologies. To further underscore the tension between art and popular culture, one can differentiate mobile games and locative media by discerning the former as a market commodity and the latter as an artistic practice. However**,** it is important emphasize that this differentiation is not unequivocal, and this is further problematized by the fact that many locative media works do have commercial applicability, or that they are funded by corporate sponsorships.

That said, mobile games are recognized in market research as a segment of the commercial gaming industry, while locative media continues to be a term employed mostly in art/education discourse to challenge "the decorporealized, screen-based experience of net art, claiming the world beyond either gallery or computer screen as its territory" (Tuters & Varnelis, 2006), for the purpose of the essay, the two terminologies will be defined in relation to its context of use.

Although mobile games have been made available in most handsets since 1997[2], the term did not become a buzzword in North America until recent years with its persistent growth in sales and profits. In 2005, mobile games generated $600 million dollars in revenue, and industry leaders project that by 2008, this number will rise to $1.5 billion (E-Marketer, 2006), inevitably making the United States a world leader "in mobile gaming revenues over the next four years" (IGDA, 2005, pp. 5). A current market research study by Telephia illustrates that wireless consumers have already purchased more than 8.2 million mobile game applications as of March this year, and in a follow up report, the mobile research firm reveals that puzzle games such as *Tetris* and *Bejeweled* continue to monopolize the commercial sphere and account for more than one third of the market's revenues in the first quarter of 2006 (Edwards, 2006).

The copious optimism within the gaming industry is predicated by three major shifts in the U.S. mobile landscape: 1) an ever-increasing number of mobile phone subscribers; 2) the eventual adoption of multimedia handsets; and

[2] Nokia embedded the world's first mobile game *Snake* into its 6100 series of cell phones in 1997.

3) the implementation of a more robust wireless network (IGDA, 2005, p.6-8). These characteristics are without a doubt, imperative in driving the uptake of mobile games; however, a major shortcoming in the current body of market research is that they tend to overemphasize the significance of technological advancements, while perennially eliding any discussion on consumer attitudes towards everyday technologies.

A good example in illustrating this argument is to refer to the Japanese mobile game market. With $1 billion in revenue (Dillon, 2006), Japan is one of the market signposts with which the U.S. mobile gaming industry is continuously aspiring to catch up to. Although advance handsets and stable networks do partly contribute to Japan's mobile game success story, nevertheless, a significant detail that is often overlooked is that Japan, unlike many other industrialized nations, has a very low Internet penetration rate.

This observation may appear out of place in a discussion on mobile games. Upon closer inspection however, the public resistance in adopting stationary Internet (due to high fees maintained by ISPs) is what ultimately enabled mobile Internet to become Japan's foremost communication and entertainment terminal. Since the Japanese do not perceive the cell phone as "a complement to the PC at home or at work", but rather as a unique entity in providing them with communication and entertainment services, this consumer attitude is critical in fostering a healthy environment for mobile games to flourish within the Japanese marketplace (Fürstenbach & Kviselius, 2000, p.17). By invoking the mobile game market in Japan as an example, the point I wish to emphasize is that the public adoption of technologies and their related applications is deeply embedded to the social, cultural, and technological factors which people have become accustomed.

To filter this discussion back into a North American perspective, the *Mobinet* research by A.T. Kearney/University of Cambridge reveals that the majority of mobile consumers in Canada and in the United States either "strongly agree" or "agree" with the statement "I will only use my phone to make and receive calls" (2005, p. 20). Since most North Americans continue to regard the

mobile phone as a device for voice telephony, this disposition is important to consider when examining the variety (or lack thereof) of mobile games that are currently available in North America. The issue of game content has become a frequently contested topic within the market discourse of mobile games. In May 2006, M:Metrics, a U.S.-based mobile data company released a report suggesting that unreasonable pricing and a lack of game selection are two major factors ailing the mobile game industry. These findings have generated an immense amount of chatter, and subsequently encouraged some industry leaders to step up and voice their opposition towards the mobile gaming medium. In a recent interview with John Hare, the game developer of *Sensible Soccer* boldly declared, "[m]obile games are the most licence driven pile of shit you've ever seen. You can't sell a mobile game unless it has a license attached. Mobile is the worst format for gaming" (Howson, 2006).

Beneath the colourful commentary, Hare's disapproval towards the mobile gaming industry and its desire in upholding brand names while sacrificing gameplay innovations is a common sentiment amongst game developers/designers. This dissent is also an exemplary manifestation of the "schism" between art and popular culture. To further contextualize this discussion, it is important to first explore the activities within the mobile value chain. In the North American mobile game landscape, game developers are responsible for designing and porting new applications. In order for designers "to bring their art to mobile phones", they must first rely on game publishers to aggregate their works, establish connections with wireless carriers, and subsequently depend on these carrier outlets to promote and distribute their content to interested consumers (IGDA, 2005, p.9-11). While it is an overstatement to reiterate that mobile carriers are interested in generating maximum profit through the advertising of mobile games, this business practice however, continues to be held chiefly responsible for saturating the market with branded and derivative content.

The confluence of commerce and creativity has always been a sensitive subject, and while it has almost become a knee-jerk reaction to automatically

blame large media conglomerates in stagnating vision for profit, this criticism is cursory because it automatically implies a top-down hierarchical relationship between [active] producers and [passive] consumers. In other words, this argument once again removes public interests and concerns from the overall market equation. It is important to recognize that while there is an increasing number of people downloading and purchasing mobile games, in comparison to other mobile mediated activities such as text messaging or even retrieving news headlines, the "mobile gamer" continues to exist as a minority (M:Metrics, 2006). According to a report by M:Metrics, it was revealed that at the end of 2004, 10 million consumers were willing to purchase mobile games, while 47 million subscribers were only interested in playing games that were already embedded in their devices (IGDA, 2005, p. 14). This observation once again confirmed the fact that, to the average North American consumer, a mobile phone is a simply a *phone*, and not a multimedia device for gaming.

These technological expectations posit an important challenge towards the marketing and distributing of mobile games in North America. Unlike a console game that is sold as a physical entity along with packaging to illustrate its content, a mobile title is usually disseminated on a carrier deck along with a 25 word game description[3] (IGDA, 2005, p.13). In this limited space, how can the industry encourage the public, many of whom do not even demonstrate an interest to pay for mobile games, to purchase these products? By relying on established brands, I would argue that this strategy is not a deliberate attempt to reject design innovations, but rather, to adopt the namesake of a celebrity, an upcoming movie, or a popular television show, this is a practical method to quickly translate information about a game title, and to elicit consumer desires through the cache of the branded presence. Of course, this analysis is not to refute the unequal distribution of power between mobile carriers, game developers and consumers. That said, by reducing the mobile value chain as unidirectional (top-down flow from carriers to consumers), this representation

[3] An example of a carrier deck
http://rogers.clearmode.com/brandstore/go?store=rogers&page=index

overshadows the agency with which the public employs in negotiating and making sense of their own mobile phone culture.

Another critic who has been vocal in disapproving the current state of the mobile game industry is Trip Hawkins. As the CEO of Digital Chocolate, a publishing firm that is funding the development of mobile games with emphasis on social themes, Hawkins has noted on many occasions that the "mobile does not need to be the stepchild of another medium" (IGDA, 2005, p.17), and believes that phone functionalities such as text messaging and photo taking can be implemented as new modes of gameplay. His assessment, while valid, it also precludes consumer concerns within the larger gaming experience. There is no doubt that a location-based game in which allows users to interact with one another will produce a more rewarding and immersive experience than a simple round of *Tetris* on the mobile phone. However, one must also recognize that the former game will introduce a myriad of issues such as privacy, surveillance, and intellectual property, all of which are trepidations preventing the North American industry from fully embracing these alternatives games.

This is not to suggest that there are no attainable solutions in reconciling these shortcomings, for example, DoCoMo—Japan's leading mobile operator has implemented "a policy against games that introduce users who don't know each other" in order to avoid 'immoral' services (Collier, 2003, p.32). That said, I am skeptical of the assumption that if these games become available, the public will indisputably buy into them because they fulfill one's desire to socialize and to show off (Ali, 2006). Currently, I do think that social mobile games will find the most success in niche markets, such as the MySpace generation (or simply put, teenagers) who are already familiar and comfortable with the idea of virtual social networking. However, this once again draws attention to the fact that consumers are dynamic in their engagement with mobile technologies, and that their choices of consumption are not directly influenced by market pressure, but rather by actively selecting media elements that best compliment their own lives.

In outlining both the optimistic and pessimistic outlooks towards the mobile gaming industry, the paper aims to provide an overview of the research area and

underscores the major weakness embedded in the two perspectives—that is a lack of focus on the users and how their experiences with everyday technologies mediate the reception of mobile games in the marketplace. Through this investigation, a useful trajectory in dismantling this problem is to recontextualize mobile technology not as a single entity, but rather as a fragment in the "media ensemble" in which people are engaged with on a day-to-day basis (Morley & Silverstone, 1991, p. 151). With this outline in mind, it is important to ask what is significance of this insight, and what purpose does it serve in helping artists to develop locative media works? I would like to conclude this paper by revisiting the dichotomies of mobile games vs. locative media, commodity vs. creativity, and exemplify the two variables do not have to exist as opposing binaries with conflicting agendas.

The analysis of high vs. mass culture is an interesting site of investigation. In *Utopian Entrepreneur*, Brenda Laurel contends "[t]oo many artists circumscribe their audiences by restricting themselves to a kind of peer-to-peer philosophical dialogue, conducted exclusively in the academy and the gallery. The argument for this elitist practice is that the general public has been too dumbed down by popular culture to understand higher-level discourse" (2001, p.10). With this tension in mind, I would argue that since most location-based artworks do implement commercial technologies such as cell phones, laptops or PDAs in mediating the audience experiences, the habitual uses of these technological gadgets should be treated as a language for not only engaging the public, but also in sustaining the objective in making art more accessible. In other words, in understanding how people are *actually* using technologies, these conventions should not be overlooked or dismissed as limitations in "dumbing down" the public, but rather as access points in providing a tangible platform to destabilize art from a privileged and institutionalized framework.

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