

Chapter 11

Mobility Matters: Classifying Locative Mobile Apps through an Affordances Approach

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ABSTRACT

Researchers generally have not been able to keep up with the rapid pace of mobile app innovation in many ways. One of those holes is with typology. Not being able to clearly describe mobile app artifacts, as a way to start a discussion about them, is a key factor holding researchers back. This chapter splinters off a promising but relatively underdeveloped genre of mobile apps, the locative ones that juxtapose interactive digital media with particular physical environments, for closer examination and better labeling. This piece quickly provides theoretical, historical, and contextual overviews to help situate locative apps as a genre of importance. It then provides informal frameworks, as thought exercises, for examining and understanding apps through a locative perspective. Two cases, also led by the author, will then be taken through this process to illustrate what can be learned from it, followed by reflections and suggestions for related future areas of inquiry.

INTRODUCTION

Just before the iPhone's original release, on June 29, 2007, MacWorld magazine published a story about customers waiting in line for the new device. This account featured the proclamation by an early adopter that "Today, I've got three things in my pocket," a cellphone, a PDA, and an iPod; "Tomorrow, I'll have one" (Barylick & Honan, 2007). Combining functions, it turned out, was only a part of the wonders of the smartphone emergence, and convergence was just the start of our understandings of mobile technologies as a new medium. To demonstrate how disorienting this mobile shift has been for society so far, the generally prescient Steve Jobs at first touted the iPhone's music storage possibilities and then its telephone capabilities. He only reluctantly opened the App Store, 18 months later, and stated that he didn't expect "much profit" from it (Kerris & Dowling, 2007; Wingfield, 2008). More than 10 million

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-8838-4.ch011

apps, though, were downloaded on the App Store's first weekend, and, as tallied at the five-year mark, the App Store was paying out \$400 million a month to developers, after Apple took its 30-percent cut from each app sold (Friedman, 2013).

On the other side of the spectrum, BlackBerry, formerly known as Research in Motion, seemingly had control of the smartphone market in the early stages, in the mid-2000s, with a focus on business clientele and a carefully controlled system of information management that matched the initial needs and activities of mobile users. As of this writing, though, less than a decade later, BlackBerry's market share has fallen to virtually zero (Silcoff, McNish, & Erman, 2013; Surowiecki, 2012). Nokia – the first global developer of mobile hardware, and at one time, the largest – has slumped as well, selling its mobile division to another teetering technology titan, Microsoft, which, despite enormous resources toward the effort, has been unable to gain much traction with its mobile devices (Ali-Yrkkö, 2013). As demonstrated in these examples, society quickly has been evolving its conceptualizations of mobile technologies, through exposure and use, and of being immersed within the complex, fluid, and varied confluences of communication, people, and place, which mobile technologies enable. Some highly paid and highly educated industry leaders, such as those within Apple and Google, have been deftly responding to this environment, while others – even those similarly paid, educated, and deft, such as those in the once-prominent Palm, Nokia, BlackBerry, and HTC companies – have suffered an inglorious fade from relevance.

Rather than the mobile content domain solidifying around a coherent industrialized vision, and parts falling into orderly place, based on commercial precedents, it has erupted into a heterogeneous and fragmented ecosystem. Classification systems have been proposed, in response, to provide shape to these ideas, and as fuel for development, yet attention to mobilities needs as much of a focus on the future as the present, with novel uses and interactions continually expected to emerge from new products, platforms, and services (Feijóo, Maghiros, Abadie, & Gómez-Barroso, 2009). While much of the early mobile media could be classified simply as shovelware, or repackaged material dumped on mobile screens, mobile-born forms are surfacing through novel device and platform affordances at various points of inspiration ((Feldmann, 2005; Jaokar & Fish, 2006). These innovations will produce both incremental and divergent developments as well as recombinative and convergent ones, that will require regular re-evaluations of content types and characteristics across multipurpose as well as special-purpose devices (Kim, Lee, Geum, & Park, 2012; Rawolle & Hess, 2000).

This dramatic shifting of human relations to mobile technologies, throughout a worldwide population, can be traced theoretically to the idea that, by enabling new sense ratios in people, a new communication medium simply shocks society, and people take a while before they figure out what to do with it (McLuhan, 1962, p. 23). As Google CEO Eric Schmidt (2010) said during his keynote speech at the Mobile World Congress in 2010: "It's like magic. All of a sudden you can do things that it never occurred to you was possible." McLuhan (1962) stated that historically such technology shock eventually is followed by a period of general adjustment, in which the community absorbs the new habit of perception, and a new normal emerges. Yet to make that adjustment, the medium has to settle through the process of people getting their hands on the technologies and thinking about what they would like to do, while researchers observe, document, and analyze what they actually do, when given the chance.

This chapter has been written during that period of tumult and discovery, in which mobile devices are pervasive, but people ambitiously are experimenting with the related technologies, and researchers still are trying to make sense of what's happening. Potential paths of inquiry seem everywhere, and researchers generally have not been able to keep up with this rapid pace of innovation in many ways. One

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