Chapter 11

Locative Media and Playful Appropriations, or How Electronic Games Help to Redefine the Meaning of Space

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents an investigation on how the ludic incorporation of locative media modifies the creation of meaning in urban spaces. In this sense, the authors try to understand how electronic games reinforce the relationship between the urban space and the digital media, allowing the creation of intelligent informational territories. The authors' hypothesis is based on the fact that these specific types of digital games – known as ubiquitous, pervasive games – develop new spatiality forms, producing – to the players – other types of use and appropriation of the urban space. In order to develop this discussion, they propose an analysis of some alternate reality games (ARGs) developed in Brazil.

INITIAL APPROACH

Ubiquitous and pervasive games appeared in the beginning of the 21st century as a result of the combination between experimental game design, mobile digital technologies, wireless networking, location-based systems and ubiquitous and pervasive computing. In Brazil, the *alternate reality games* (ARGs) are the most relevant examples of games inscribed in those categories, being experimented in a growing scale since around

year 2004. In contrast with their growing popularity, most ARGs related researches lack a more thorough theoretical approach, being limited to the discussion of how to use these games as part of companies' marketing strategies.

In order to expand the reflection about alternate reality games, particularly in Brazil, this chapter presents an investigation on how locative media has been used alongside these new appropriations of ludic forms to modify the way individuals actually relate to urban space. In this sense, we seek to apprehend the way these electronic games – those which are played with the assistance of locative media, strengthening the relationship between urban and digital/informational space – bring forth the possibility of creation of new meanings for the urban space.

Our hypothesis is that the relationship between the development of these alternate reality games and the notions of mobility and spatiality gives birth to new forms of appropriation – use and adaptation – of urban space, producing new senses of meaning to places people are used to. As an unfolding of this central hypothesis, we believe that locative media can go back and forth on a two way road: at the same time that they work as an in-game communication device, between players and characters, they serve as a tool to the players' articulation in the urban space quests, in the game context. To elaborate our discussion, we propose an analysis of the Brazilian play phenomena which are contained in this category – known to researchers by the title of pervasive and ubiquitous games, which in Brazil are most represented by the genre of the alternate reality games.

The analysis corpus featured on this chapter comprises some of the offspring of the convergence between ubiquitous computing and experimental game design, which reconfigured the way by which the electronic games are related to ordinary life and urban spaces in the "normal" life, as game theorist Johan Huizinga (1950) would name it. Ubiquitous computing is the field of computer science responsible to enhance the latent potential of objects and physical environments with the application of the same functionalities networks uphold, according to computer theorist Mark Weiser (1991; 1994). Experimental game design is the field of interactive arts that aims at developing new and revolutionary platforms and contexts to digital games, according to ubiquitous games theorist Jane McGonigal (2006; 2007). Finally, our understanding of locative media is related to those media which combine informational data provided by wireless networks to a specifically considered urban space, according to Tuters & Varnelis, (2006), Santaella (2008a, 2008b, 2008c), and Lemos (2007, 2008a, 2008b, 2009, 2010).

Our choice, then, was to focus on a specific genre of ubiquitous games, the Alternate Reality Games (ARGs) – which are games that blurs the boundaries between fiction and reality, creating a sense of a 'new reality' experienced by its players. The criteria used to choose these games among the variety of ubiquitous and pervasive games experienced worldwide was the fact that this is the only genre with a proper representation in Brazil. We have chosen to analyze five of these games: (i) *Instituto Purifica* (2006, MTV), (ii) *O Tambor* (2007, MTV), (iii) *Zona Incerta* (2007, Guaraná Antártica / Superinteressante - Abril Jovem), (iv) *Desenrola* (2009 Raccord/OiFuturo), and (v) *A Fórmula do Conhecimento* (2009, Engenhonovo/Realidade Sintética/Unijorge), aiming specifically at judging how the use of locative media helped – or not – these games to create a new sense of place. These five specific titles were chosen because of the fact that they represent the biggest games – both in quantity of players and amount of budget spent – developed in Brazil. We propose the premise that alternate reality games force their players to experience urban space through new signifying lenses, giving new meaning to objects (in a broader sense of the word, representing both people, places and things) both determined by their interaction with the urban space *per se* and the informational layer in the form of wireless networks of any kind. In this sense, we believe

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