

The Mogi location-aware community and its interaction order: “Augmented” face-to-face encounters as rare, public performances.

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ABSTRACT

We analyze here the interaction order of a location-aware community playing a location-based game, Mogi. We show how players usually separate their involvement in the game from other engagements, so that as a group they behave like a community of 'real life' strangers, relating to one another almost only through the game locative and communication media. This enables them to avoid certain unwanted consequences which the publicity of locations (a core feature of the Mogi experience) might entail. Relationships develop within the game and are usually kept there, subverting the primacy of face-to-face encounters which underlies our usual understanding of what social life is about. Face-to-face meetings between players are relatively rare events. When the participants remain logged on to the game, such encounters, potentially heralded by precursor 'mediated co-proximity events' become public, collective performances to be seen, appreciated, commented on and gossiped about by an audience of 'distant onlookers'.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

H5.m Information interfaces and presentation (e.g. HCI).
Miscellaneous

General Terms

Human Factors.

Keywords

Mobility, location awareness, locative media, interaction.

1. INTRODUCTION

Goffman has shown in detail how the social management of the ritual constraints of face-to-face encounters is a core feature of the copresence-based interaction order (Goffman, 1963; 1971). What happens when face-to-face encounters take place in 'hybrid ecologies' supported by locative media (Crabtree and Rodden, 2008)? In what sense are such encounters oriented towards emergent behaviors while being 'highly sensitive to the social and

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institutional practices of users' (Barkhuus and Dourish, 2004).

This paper explores the construction of face-to-face encounters as rare 'augmented' public performances, and the meanings ascribed to them within the location-aware culture that evolves among Mogi players. We posit that the study of this seemingly peculiar interaction order provides us with general insights on encounters in location-aware social groups.

2. THE MOGI LOCATION-AWARE GAME

The game Mogi was developed by a team led by Mathieu Castelli at a French start-up (Newtgames), and was commercialized in 2003 in Japan by the operator KDDI. The gameplay consists in collecting virtual objects with a mobile phone. These are 'localized' (in the sense that users can act on them only when they are close to their virtual position) and are continuously created and renewed by the game designers. The player has an interface, the 'radar', featuring a map with a radius of one kilometer. This map represents the player's environment, with his or her pictogram in the centre of the mobile screen, surrounded by those of the other players and virtual objects situated within the 1 km radius. These data are updated with each server request¹. When players are less than about 300 meters² from an object they can capture it with their terminal. Each object belongs to a collection. Completing a collection earns points, and players are classified according to the points accumulated. The basic idea is to create a community of high-tech hunter-gatherers whose activity is set in an economy based on the bartering of virtual objects and a sociability based on text messaging.

The main functionalities of the game are accessible from the main menu. The five most important are:

¹ The rapidity of these connections with the game server is critical to the game's acceptability. At certain times the connection time ranged from 30 seconds to one minute, which was experienced as a real problem by players.

² Experience of the game is richer with a GPS terminal (the precision of geo-localization is then a matter of a few meters) but the game also offers the possibility of localization from cells. Experienced players have become accustomed to constantly switching from one to the other in their quest for objects since the map in cell mode is slightly different to the GPS map, due to the position of the antennae. It is therefore likely to reveal new objects in one or two clicks, without the player moving at all.

- The 'radar' interface, the map of the player's immediate environment. By clicking on a sufficiently close object on the map the player can pick it up by launching a collection module. Clicking on a player's icon on the screen opens a window for text messaging.
- The module dedicated to text messaging. The addresses and messages exchanged are accessible only within the game server. Players can create buddy lists of favorite correspondents (Mogi friends or the members of teams to which they belong³).
- The exchange and transaction module (for exchanging objects missing from one's collection).
- The user profile: those who can choose to make all or part of the inventory of objects that they possess visible, as well as the type of object they want.
- Public classification of players according to the number of accumulated points. This classification is frequently consulted by players and introduces competition between them.



Figure 1: The radar interface that represents the local map of the game around the player (whose icon always appears in the centre of the screen) in an area of four square kilometers. The other players and geo-localized virtual objects appear on the map. The 'closest Mogi-friend' is indicated at the bottom of the screen, with the distance even if it is more than 2 kilometers. This functionality was added by the designers to facilitate the 'onscreen encounters' discussed below.

The game objects are designed by the design team. Certain collections are very simple, for instance precious stones spread across Japan. Others play on the players' situation and context. Certain objects are available only in some parts of the country, other collections are visible and accessible only at certain times of the day. The design was recently oriented towards more advanced objects, virtual 'creatures' (that create, move or destroy nearby objects), chests (players close to them can aim for an object and

³ This possibility of creating teams and getting together, introduced shortly before my study, has been highly successful.

thus obtain the right to open the chest, with the hope of winning a highly valuable object), or quests (additional points can be earned by moving an object close to a given place). This diversity illustrates an important property of context-aware services. Context-awareness concerns not only people or terminals but also informational objects that can be 'placed' in the mobile user's environment. As the Mogi example shows, it is possible to enhance a mobile users' environment almost indefinitely, and to create rich and complex ecologies that could be called 'augmented' towns.

It is also possible to log onto Mogi on a PC, through a website. In this case the interfaces and functionalities are different. The Web interface includes a chat function not accessible on mobile terminals, but its key feature is that it allows PC-based players to visualize maps showing other players and bigger geo-located objects, throughout Japan. Since they are stationary they can pinpoint the position of highly coveted objects or unusual movements of their 'mogi-friends'⁴ and team members. This is common knowledge among players and has the very important consequence of turning the Mogi players into a location-aware community, in which one's location (as presented in the interfaces) and consequently one's displacements become public data, in the particular sense of always being potentially accessible to well-known players logged on the Web and almost any players close by logged on through their mobile phones. Unusual locations are commented on, and 'territories' may be ascribed to players by their fellow on the basis of the repeated observation of their mobility patterns (Licoppe and Inada, 2008).

3. THE PLAYERS

The game was played between 2003 and 2008, and on average had about one thousand active users, all of whom were subscribers to a service offering an unlimited mobile data transfer for a flat rate (the WIN rate of 4,200 yen offered by KDDI). Players considered that this type of rate freed them from any worry as to the intensity of their use, and that its existence had a liberating effect on the development of their game practices. Subscription to the game as such was 210 yens per month, which the players considered negligible. KDDI ran no adverts on the game. As part of promotion campaigns, it nevertheless offered a one-month free trial period twice a year for Mogi and many other games on its portal. Most Mogi players who had previously had a WIN subscription had taken advantage of these promotions to try the game, after being attracted by the context-aware concept applied in Mogi.

The Mogi gameplay differs from games available on Internet because it is a multiplayer game based on a very straightforward scenario. Although no precise statistics are available, user profiles are clearly very different to those observed on the Internet. There are almost as many female as male users. A large proportion of users are in the 25-40 age-group. Our study focused on five men and five women in that age-group with widely diverse social origins, from a bank manager to a packer, a sophisticated young mother to a saleslady in a department store. Two of them had a

⁴ There is a procedure similar to the one found on Web social networking sites for players to include one another on their 'buddy lists' and thus ratify a status of mutual friendship within the game ('Mogi-friendship').

slight handicap and found that the sociability of the game allowed them a degree of social integration⁵.

With respect to playing behavior, two very different ideal types can be observed: a) accumulation-oriented collectors, who collect as many objects as they can (sometimes ten times the same collection) and interact with other players mostly to obtain the objects they do not yet have; b) 'social' players who are less concerned about collecting virtual objects than with the game as a way to meet other players, to communicate and to maintain enduring social relationships with them. Those players are particularly attentive to the forms of politeness that develop in the location-aware community of players, and to the proprieties of the various forms of encounter occasioned within the game.

The players were mostly unknown to one another, with a few exceptions of players trying to recruit close same-sex friends into the game. In interviews they said they would feel uneasy if other members of the family were also players, because they felt uncomfortable with the idea of the kind of location knowledge provided by the game being available to close acquaintances. Some also said that their use of the game was covert with respect to their spouses and family. The situation was therefore a relative segregation of game-related social behavior and 'real space' social life. Players also maintained social contacts within the game in the realm of electronic media, mostly within the 'Mogi mail' infrastructure. They rarely exchanged their mobile internet addresses, and even more rarely met face to face. Face-to-face encounters were the exception rather than the rule. This apparent shyness may be a feature of inhabiting a location-aware world with unknown others (i.e. unknown outside the scope of the game).

In the following section we discuss one of the few occasions on which players met face to face, to understand some of the peculiarities of a face-to-face encounter in a location-aware world.

4. AN 'AUGMENTED' SOCIAL GATHERING

4.1 The first 'Shinjuku meeting'

The players involved all belonged to the same 'Shinjuku team', which included a few players working in the Shinjuku area but also some Osaka players. One of the latter, Yoshida, who traveled regularly to Tokyo for professional reasons, recalled that he happened to be there when he received a message from one of the team members, saying 'Oh you're very close. What's happening?' After Yoshida had explained, the other player said 'then we will assemble', and they managed a first meeting with two other players in Shinjuku, spoiled to some extent by the fact that some other players were not able to join them.

The word used to describe such an unplanned social gathering is '' which translates roughly as 'off encounter' or offline social gathering. It highlights the fact that these players mostly interact through text messages and with resources provided by the locative

⁵ For cultural and religious reasons, it seems that people with handicaps find it very difficult to be socially integrated in Japan.

media available to them. This recollection also shows us two key features of the location-based Mogi culture: a) how locations are treated as potentially public by players, since members of one's team and Mogi friends may see, notice, and remark upon one's location at any time; and b) the fact that mediated co-proximity – i.e. when two players realize that they appear on their mobile radar map at the same time – is a particularly remarkable event, which is expected to be noticed and mentioned, especially when the players are close enough for their icons to almost touch. We have shown in previous research how the exchange of a pair of messages of the type 'we are close, aren't we?' had become a kind of conventional greeting adjusted to this very particular situation (Licoppe and Inada, 2005; 2009). We have also shown how the noticing of such 'mediated proximities' (or proximities perceived beyond sighting distance) projected face-to-face encounters as a relevant future course of action, even though players were highly inventive in finding ways to avoid such an eventuality (Licoppe, 2009).

The narrative provided by Yoshida can only be understood against the background assumptions and meanings characterizing the Mogi location-aware culture with respect to the particular situation it describes: two players remarking upon their 'mediated proximity' and treating this (for once) as an opportunity to initiate a social gathering. Three players in the team actually met on the same evening. This encounter led them astray from their usual reluctance to communicate in any way other than via the Mogi message system. In the event of the Mogi mail server experiencing one of its frequent breakdowns, they had decided to exchange their mobile mail addresses to be able to coordinate moment by moment, prior to their later meeting.

During this first meeting, the three participants decided to meet again, so as to also include one of the female players who could not make it that time. We now wish to discuss in more detail some aspects of the text messages they exchanged before, during and after this second meeting⁶, to highlight some of the peculiarities of meeting face to face in such a location-aware community.

4.2 The second 'Shinjuku meeting'

This second meeting was supposed to involve two male players from Osaka on a day on which they both happened to be in Tokyo for professional reasons, and three other players working in Shinjuku (one male and two female). We will discuss empirical data taken from our corpus of text messages, though we cannot include the full conversations for lack of place. We have isolated four types of interactional sequences which highlight some of the most striking features of their meeting, and which we think might be relevant in one way or another in many kinds of meeting augmented by locative media and mutual positional knowledge.

Precursor proximity ripples

Since all the players were in Tokyo on the previous afternoon, it happened that two of them got close twice, while connected, and noticed the fact. There were therefore two instances of 'mediated co-proximity' events which enacted the possibility of their meeting prior to the planned meeting, without them taking the necessary joint actions to produce such an outcome. Planned

⁶ We managed to recover the actual message threads, in an anonymized segment of the Mogi mail archive to which the game designers gave us access.

meetings may thus be heralded by a host of mediated co-proximity events which may be turned into as many occasions to meet or not (in which case they are characteristically treated as 'near misses'). Such precursor events blur the boundary between absence and presence.

The dual orientation towards looking out for the other and monitoring his or her location onscreen

In the final moment before the first two players – who had never seen each other before – met, they exchanged messages showing how they were monitoring their location onscreen while looking for each other. In the same messages they could simultaneously provide formulations of known landmarks to guide the other player to find the right place, and cues to support visual recognition (such as the approaching female player describing how she was dressed), while still commenting and assessing their closeness with expressions characteristic of the use of screen-mediated positional knowledge. This dual orientation may even be prolonged during the encounter itself, if for instance the players watch the convergence of their avatars onscreen, which was the case during this particular four-player meeting.

A performance which is spontaneously appreciated by 'distant onlookers'

In the Mogi location-aware culture where actual face-to-face encounters are rare, close proximities, marked by the touching of avatars, become meaningful events called 'cara-gattai'. Such happenings are publicly appreciated (for they are visible to other players), and members of the Mogi community even play at getting their own avatar to touch that of another player while not being there at the time (Licoppe and Inada, 2009). This is consequential for actual meetings since Mogi friends and members of the same team may posit themselves in an original participation frame, something akin to a 'distant onlooker' appreciating the closeness of the participants in the meeting as a remarkable 'gattai'-related performance. This was the case in the Shinjuku meeting: an uninvolved player commented on the contact between the avatars of two participants which he was able to see on his computer screen. There is no such thing as a 'private' face-to-face encounter between connected members.

Notifying Mogi friends to get them to enjoy the meeting as a cultural performance

It is not that the players necessarily want to keep their face-to-face encounters private. During the encounter itself, the two girls sent messages to several of their friends, inviting them to watch the 'four-player gattai' on their computer screens, and to send them messages appreciative of such performance. This stimulated Mogi-based social networking, for in order to gain full visual access to the show and enjoy the mediated representation of the actual gathering, some of the addressees of such invitations had to become Mogi-friends with one of the meeting participants.

5. CONCLUSION

Mogi players constitute what may at first look like a strange community or tribe. However, their social behavior has a wider relevance for our understanding of locative media and the kinds of culture that may develop around them, as well as the consequences that choices in locative technology design might entail. What we have shown here was a tendency to segregate Mogi-related behavior from other involvements, in order to avoid some unwanted consequences of the publicity of locations (a core feature of the Mogi experience). This turns the Mogi players into a community of prior 'strangers' connected only through the game. Relationships develop within the game and are usually kept there, subverting the primacy of face-to-face encounters which usually underlie our mundane understandings of what social life is about. Face-to-face meetings between players are relatively rare events. When the participants remain logged on to the game, such encounters, potentially heralded by precursor 'mediated co-proximity events' become public and collective performances to be seen, appreciated, commented upon and gossiped about by an audience of 'distant onlookers'.

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