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Mobile Technology and Place

Edited by
Rowan Wilken and Gerard Goggin

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Rowan Wilken:
For Lois Wilken, the best aunty you could ever hope for.

Gerard Goggin:
For Jacqueline, como siempre.

Figures and Tables

TABLES

4.1 Statistics of the Spatial Distribution of *Surechigai Tsushin* Events in *Dragon Quest 9* 62

FIGURES

4.1 The typical range of WiFi-based proximity encounters. 61
4.2 The game terminal interface showing three "encountered" players. 65
4.3 A player in the Akihabara meeting spot with the game terminal in his right hand and his mobile phone in the other. 67
4.4 Game meeting places. 71
4.5 Connecting to games. 71
4.6 A biker stopping by to play. 72
4.7 The start of the meeting, with the core group of regulars. 75
4.8 Later on with new players, joining in to exchange maps. 75
4.9 Group of players and the cardboard figure marking the place. 81
4.10 Players sitting and standing in the group, and a passerby walking his dog. 81
4.11 Stone construction on which several players sat. 82
4.12 Group of teenage girls passing by, and a homeless man washing his dishes. 82
7.1 Creative practitioners' connections from Darwin to other Northern Territory locations, expressed as a percentage of all work linkages within and beyond Darwin, 2008. 128

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Rowan Wilken, Swinburne University of Technology
Gerard Goggin, The University of Sydney
July 2011

Contents

List of Figures and Tables ix
Acknowledgments xi

PART I
Theorizing Place and Mobiles

1 Mobilizing Place: Conceptual Currents and Controversies 3
ROWAN WILKEN AND GERARD GOGGIN

2 The Place of Mobility:
Technology, Connectivity, and Individualization 26
JEFF MALPAS

3 Topologies of Human-Mobile Assemblages 39
RICHARD EK

PART II
Media, Publics, and Place-Making

4 When Urban Public Places Become
"Hybrid Ecologies": Proximity-based Game
Encounters in *Dragon Quest 9* in France and Japan 57
CHRISTIAN LICOPPE AND YORIKO INADA

5 The Urban Dynamics of Net Localities: How Mobile and
Location-Aware Technologies Are Transforming Places 89
ERIC GORDON AND ADRIANA DE SOUZA E SILVA

6 The Real Estate of the Trained-Up Self: (Or is this England?) 104
CAROLINE BASSETT

PART III
Urbanity, Rurality, and the Scene of Mobiles

7 (Putting) Mobile Technologies in Their Place:
A Geographical Perspective 123
CHRIS GIBSON, SUSAN LUCKMAN, AND CHRIS BRENNAN-HORLEY

8 Still Mobile: A Case Study on Mobility,
Home, and Being Away in Shanghai 140
LARISSA HJORTH

9 Connection and Inspiration:
Phenomenology, Mobile Communications, Place 157
IAIN SUTHERLAND

PART IV
Bodies, Screens, and Relations of Place

10 Going Wireless: Disengaging the Ethical Life 175
EDWARD S. CASEY

11 Parerga of the Third Screen: Mobile Media, Place, and Presence 181
INGRID RICHARDSON AND ROWAN WILKEN

12 Encoding Place: The Politics of Mobile Location Technologies 198
GERARD GOGGIN

13 The Infosphere, the Geosphere, and the Mirror:
The Geomedia-based Normative Renegotiations
of Body and Place 213
FRANCESCO LAPENTA

List of Contributors 227
Index 233

Part I

Theorizing Place and Mobiles

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1 Mobilizing Place
Conceptual Currents and Controversies

Rowan Wilken and Gerard Goggin

"We are always in place, and place is always with us."[1]

"'Place' [. . .] in the radically imploded space of the global civilisation of the early twenty-first century remains [one] of the most problematical but compelling human concerns within the continuing experience of modernity."[2]

"Traditionally, place is an interweaving of communication and action."[3]

INTRODUCTION

Sometime in late 2010, the number of mobile cellular subscriptions worldwide exceeded the five billion mark, more than doubling since 2005. As the International Telecommunications Union has noted, mobile services are now available to over 90 percent of the world's population, including some 80 percent of the population living in rural areas.[4] Of course, such aggregate figures belie important aspects of actual access, consumption, and use of these technologies—especially of the myriad applications, functions, and meanings that comprise them. Nonetheless, there is abundant evidence of the global growth and ubiquity of mobile technologies.

From 2005 to the present day, we have also witnessed a fundamental change in the nature of mobile technologies themselves, made possible by the deployment of third-generation (3G) and fourth-generation (4G) networks, and the intelligence at the edges of such networks in the multimedia capabilities of the mobile technologies themselves. Since the arrival of the iPhone in mid-2007, and then the iPad in early 2010, the smartphone and tablet computer, respectively, have attracted the keen interest of users, industry insiders, and content developers alike. Such developments in the technical nature of mobiles have been intertwined with the shift from the mobile phone's innovations in voice and text communications to the central role mobiles now play in contemporary media—illustrated by the rise of many distinctive mobile-remediated forms: the resilient medium of text

messaging, especially important in low-bandwidth countries in the global south; mobile news and citizen journalism; video and television; music and games; maps, location, navigation, and wayfindings; mobile Internet, in many different forms; apps for the care of the self, whether to do with lifestyle, identity, fitness, health and illness; and e-reading on mobile devices. In these developments in mobile technologies, place has played a prominent role. Because these are technologies in which mobility is key, there has been an everyday concern with their relationship to particular places (e.g., the space occupied by an individual while they use a device) and place in general. As mobile technologies have developed, their links with, focus on, and reliance on place have only deepened. This is most obvious in the wave of location, mapping, and sensor technologies that underpin applications such as maps for mobiles and Internet-based geoweb applications migrating to mobile platforms (most prominently, Google Maps).

There is intense popular, commercial, government, and civil society interest in mobile technologies. In research, mobile technologies have been examined extensively from a variety of perspectives across many disciplines. In particular, much has been revealed about the implications for mobile technologies on space and time.[5] Surprisingly, there has been a great deal less research and thinking on these technologies and the important role of place. Thus, the interactions between mobile technologies and place are little understood, despite the recent renewal of interest in related questions of location and geography in fields such as media and communications, cultural studies, and sociology.[6]

In this light, the book gives detailed, critical attention to the concept of place, exploring what significance this concept has in an era that sees continued and rapid growth in networked mobile technologies, and how these technologies have contributed to reconfigured understandings of and engagements with place. To explain the key theories and conceptual issues in mobile technologies and place, this chapter takes three progressive steps. First, the chapter begins by examining this most elusive of concepts—place—and how it has been conceived and debated over time by a wide range of theorists and critics from the fields of humanist geography (Yi-Fu Tuan, Edward Relph, Nigel Thrift, Doreen Massey, Tim Cresswell), architecture and phenomenology (David Seamon), philosophy (Edward Casey, Jeff Malpas), sociology (Manuel Castells), anthropology (Marc Augé), critical theory (Michel de Certeau), and media and communications (Joshua Meyrowitz). Second, we consider the particular challenges that are posed to established understandings of place by various forms of (macro and micro scale) mobilities *and* global networked information and communications technologies—in other words, the dual shaping influence of what Thomas Misa evocatively terms "the compelling tangle of modernity and technology."[7] Third, we narrow the focus slightly to consider the impacts of *mobile technologies* on place. The chapter concludes by returning to questions of definition, and, in overall terms, what is at stake in this concept of

place in the present era of global mobile technologies. Let us begin, then, by developing an account of place: how it has been defined and understood, and how it forms a rich yet elusive concept.

UNDERSTANDING PLACE

The concept of place is notoriously complex and fraught. According to Jody Berland, it "has become one of the most anxiety-ridden concepts today."[8] Dealing with the idea of place is especially difficult due to its lack of definitional clarity and precision. As Nigel Thrift notes, "defining exactly what place is turns out to be very difficult."[9] Even in as compendious and impressive a study as Edward Casey's *Getting Back into Place*, place is everywhere present but nowhere defined.[10] Basic dictionary definitions do little to resolve general understanding of the term. For instance, *The Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary* offers thirteen variations, which range from broad references to space and its occupation to the differentiation of types or subcategories of geographical space and the occupation of these spaces (including, in order of increasing expansion: a residence or dwelling; a group of houses in a town; a town square; a village, a town, a city; an area or region).[11] This particular example adds support to Tim Cresswell's observation that "the commonsense uses of the word place belie its conceptual complexity."[12]

As Cresswell explains, in practical terms, place can be usefully understood as "a meaningful site that combines location, locale, and sense of place."[13] These last three elements correspond in turn with the following: "the 'where' of place"; the "material setting for social relations"; and, "the more nebulous meanings associated with a place: the feelings and emotions a place evokes."[14] Thus, as Edward Relph puts it, places "are constituted in our memories and affections through repeated encounters and complex associations."[15]

One of the issues with definitions of place, and with attempts at definition in general, as the preceding explanation highlights, is that place "is not just the 'where' of something; it is the location plus everything that occupies that location seen as an integrated and meaningful phenomenon."[16] Lukermann describes this as a process involving complex integrations of nature and culture that have developed and continue to develop in particular locations, and which connect flows of people and goods to other places.[17]

In other words, "in any given place we encounter a combination [and interlinking] of materiality, meaning and practice."[18] Each of these three terms warrants further explanation. The first, materiality, is intended to suggest that places have both "a material structure," as well as being constituted via "all the material things that pass through" them, such as "commodities [including mobile media technologies], vehicles, waste, and people."[19] The second, meaning, connects back to one of the most entrenched understandings of place from within human geography—the

idea that "location became place when it became meaningful."[20] The third and final element, practice, and more specifically *mundane practice*, is especially significant for understanding the interactions of mobile technology and place.[21] As Cresswell writes:

> Places are continuously enacted as people go about their everyday lives—going to work, doing the shopping, spending leisure time, and hanging out on street corners. The sense we get of a place is heavily dependent on practice and, particularly, the reiteration of practice on a regular basis.[22]

It is this aspect of place that forms a vital ingredient in the examination of mobile technology and place in this book.

An even more expansive perspective on place is to suggest that difficulties of definition and experiential expression are in fact due to the notion of place being all-pervasive, structuring and shaping every facet of our lives, as well as of our negotiation and experience of the lived world.[23] In this respect, difficulties in grasping the notion of place are very much like the difficulties attending the category of the quotidian or everyday.[24] As Maurice Blanchot says of the everyday, "whatever its other aspects, the everyday has this essential trait: it allows no hold. It escapes."[25] Its pervasiveness renders it as platitude.[26] But, as Blanchot adds, "this banality is also what is most important, if it brings us back to existence in its very spontaneity and as it is lived."[27] And so it is with place. The pervasiveness of place and its plurality of forms means that it allows no hold; its ubiquity and diffuseness is what makes place most important as it informs and shapes lived existence.[28] Thus, place can be understood as all-pervasive in the way that it informs and shapes everyday lived experience—including how it is filtered and experienced via the use of mobile media technologies. As Casey puts it, "place serves as the condition for all existing things."[29]

Further valuable conceptualizations of place include: the idea of place as being a structure of feeling or generated by "fields of care;"[30] place as open and relational rather than bounded;[31] place as "more and more demonstrably the outcome of embodied social practice," where "people determine its shape and meanings;"[32] and, inverting the previous understanding, as that which "is integral to the very structure and possibility of experience"[33] and "within and with respect to which subjectivity is itself established."[34]

These quite diverse definitional tributaries point to the difficulty in arriving at shared definitional understandings of place. This task is made all the more difficult, Thrift argues, by two further factors that are increasingly hard to disentangle: the fact that meanings of place are "increasingly bound up with the growth of the media," including "the burgeoning of representations of place,"[35] and the fact that place experience has been inexorably altered as a result of both micro and macro forms of mobility. That is to say, place has been affected profoundly by the micro scale of (largely localized)

experiences of networked mobility (the primary concern of a number of the contributions to this book), and the macro scale of global geopolitical transformations;[36] as well as, the micro politics of mobile, technologically equipped bodies in transit through place(s),[37] and the macro-scale geopolitics of voluntary and forced migration and displacement.[38] In the following sections, we explore some of this terrain, beginning with a consideration of the impacts of larger scale mobilities on place as understood within the established literature on globalization, before turning to the more intimately scaled impacts of mobile technology use on place.

GLOBAL FLOWS: MOBILITY, TECHNOLOGY, PLACE

Place and mobility, Tim Cresswell observes, tend to be "marked by disagreements between those who see mobility and process as antagonistic to place and those who think of place as created by both internal and external mobilities and processes."[39] Expanding on this observation, Massey and Thrift suggest:

> place has become one of the key means by which the social sciences and humanities are attempting to lever open old ways of proceeding and tell new stories about the world, whether as a vast space of flows [more on this to follow] in which place is gradually being erased or as the sensuous rediscovery of the pleasures of the specific in which place is being rediscovered as something in-between.[40]

Both these passages draw out how (macro scale) *mobility*—especially of the kind associated with globalization—forms a kind of fault line along which place is, depending on one's point of view, either unsettled or reconstituted.

The potentially detrimental effects of global processes on place were a major concern for key scholars of place, such as Edward Relph and David Seamon, who were writing in the mid to late 1970s, an influential period in North American scholarship on place. Perhaps influenced by the contemporaneous wave of equally influential media and communications scholarship on cultural imperialism,[41] which expressed the idea that cultural globalization "can act as a solvent, dissolving cultural differences to create homogeneity across the globe,"[42] Relph and Seamon both express concern for a potential gradual erasure of place and the specificity and uniqueness of place. For instance, Seamon writes in his 1979 book, *A Geography of the Lifeworld* (a book that was strongly influenced by the arguments of Relph's *Place and Placelessness*, published in 1976), that "technology and mass culture destroy the uniqueness of places and promote global homogenization."[43] This has led to the charge that Seamon is "suspicious of developments in 'mass communications',"[44] an accusation that he resists.[45] Even so, Seamon has softened his

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