

Keith Lawson

Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada

PLACE, PATH, AND COMMUNITY: EVALUATING STRATEGIES FOR MOBILE APPLICATION CREATION BY MEMORY INSTITUTIONS (Paper)

Abstract:

Developments in mobile devices and mobile applications offer opportunities and challenges for memory institutions. Developing research on mobile devices illuminates how devices can be used to connect users with locations and with digital objects and to create a sense of place. Research on place and on game design and narrative can be used to help construct extended tours connecting a number of individual places. And the increasing use of mobile social networks highlights the need for institutions to create an experience of community through mobile applications.

Résumé:

1. Background

Museums and memory institutions have shifted “from being primarily presenters of objects to being sites for experiences that offer visitors opportunities for individual meaning making and narrative creation” (Ross, C., et al., 277 – 278). Many institutions have investigated mobile applications that offer new channels to engage established and new audiences within or beyond the walls of the institution. Mobile applications also offer possibilities for engagement—both for users to connect with other users and for users to connect with the community of professional curators and scholars who may otherwise be out of reach.

2. Purpose

This paper investigates how mobile devices and related ideas of space and place are relevant for memory institutions and their goals. It considers how mobile applications can 1) connect locations and items in a collection and create a sense of place, 2) deliver an engaging experience on an tour connecting a number of places, and 3) connect users with other users or with experts. This paper focuses on the use of mobile devices to allow institutions to reach beyond their walls by geo-locating digital items from the collection in urban space. This strategy fits in with a renewed academic and popular interest in the topic of place (Raven, 2014, 6) and with the popular use of mobile devices to navigate and explore locations. The Pew Research Center reports that—depending on age—between 80% and 95% of smartphone users use their phone to get directions or other information related to their current location (Pew Research, 2015, n.p.). The paper illustrates strategies for place-making, narrative design and user and community engagement with examples drawn from selected applications created by museums and memory institutions.

3. Space and Place

Mobile applications can connect a user to a place associated with an artefact or an historical event. Conceptions of space have changed with developments in mobile technology and its use, and have moved beyond the idea that the “microworlds” these devices create separate us from

the physical and social world around us (Richardson, 2007, 212). Recent relational or augmented theories emphasize how digital technologies and visualizations can be involved in place-making (San Cornelio and Ardévol, 2011, 317). The paper uses de Certeau's ideas of space as a framework for understanding how this type of place-making works.

In addition, tourism research has studied the drive to visit specific locations associated with significant people or events, and more recently has studied tourists' use of mobile devices to search for the authentic (MacCannell, 1973) or to enjoy a more playful post-modern connection to location (Cohen, 1988). The perspective of tourism studies can help institutions understand the motivation of users or visitors and the goals they wish to fulfill through place-making activities.

4. Tableau and Tour

Using mobile devices to create an extended experience connecting a number of locations in a tour is a complex undertaking, requiring what de Certeau refers to as a specific type of spatial language—the language of narrative rather than of description (de Certeau, 1988). Some useful insights into spatial narrative come from studying the narrative strategies used by location based mobile games. Makers of mobile games are very aware that the physical environment can either play a role in the narrative or threaten a loss of narrative control (Hansen, 2014; Jenkins, 2004; Ritchie, 2014). This research suggests that creating a successful spatial narrative or tour requires connecting a distinct series of places with an engaging narrative structure.

5. Community

A sense of community is often the desired conclusion for a tour or narrative, but achieving this sense of belonging is difficult and can easily seem false or forced. The first version of Explore 9/11, a mobile app created by the National September 11 Memorial and Museum, relied on a clear narrative structure leading to a concluding expression of community memory and engagement. This sense of community requires commitment and work from app users—the type of narrative engagement work understood by game designers.

Recent work on Locative Mobile Social Networks (LMSN) shows how important the social feature of mobile devices has become for users' experience of location. These new applications “either allow users to find specific others in urban spaces, or they promote awareness of the location of unknown masses” (Sutko & de Souza e Silva, 2010, 810). These developments suggest that it may be possible to create applications which enable the creation of “street sociability...born out of the tension of anonymity and intimacy, the tension in which encounters are dictated by chance” (Lehtonen and Mäenpää, 1997, 158). However, the dominance of large and established social network applications in the mobile space may make it necessary to develop other strategies to connect users or to create a feeling of community and shared experience.

Mobile devices and applications are powerful tools for connecting collections with users and for enabling users to experience place and community. Understanding the evolving research into mobile devices and mobile applications can help institutions design and create effective projects.

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