

Are cell phones new media?

by Dr. Adriana de Souza e Silva

What's new media? We have been used, throughout the 1990s, to think about new media as somehow involving the Internet, interfaced via a desktop computer screen, a keyboard, and a mouse. The term new media brought to mind cyberspace, constructed as a virtual environment detached from the physical world, a place where people could inhabit and create new types of communities.

Virtual communities have often been studied as narrative places in which users create collective non-linear stories, and build up environments solely via text. In the first decade of the 21st century, I shall risk to say that cyberspace is gone. The idea of a virtual world, a simulated space, completely disconnected from our physical environment, is challenged by the emergence of mobile technology devices, such as cell phones.

In the United States, as well as in other countries in Latin America, like Brazil, it is hard to believe that cell phones can be something other than simply mobile telephones. Likewise, affirming that mobile devices are new interfaces through which communities are formed seems odd.

However, Japan and Scandinavian countries show us that mobile phones are also extensions of the hand, embodying the role of a tool. A tool is something that disappears in function of its use. For instance, a pen is a writing tool. A keyboard is also a writing tool, which we do not even perceive while interacting

with digital environments. Will cell phones also be used as writing tools?

The use of SMS (Short Message Service) in Finland and Sweden, as well as in other European countries, already corresponds to the main role of mobile devices. In Finland, people send more SMS than emails, and there are many more cell phones than personal computers. Likewise, in Japan, the use of mobile email is one of the main functions of the i-mode – thumb competitions award the fastest **ke-tai** typers.

Reasons for the success of the mobile Internet include the low availability of personal computers, restricted space for big devices (such as desktop computers), and expensive landline infrastructures. Expensive and poor landline infrastructure is one of the main reasons for cell phone growth in Brazil. A mobile phone is cheaper than a fixed telephone. However, in Brazil, cell phones are mostly used as in the U.S. — as voice communication devices.

But the use of SMS, in addition to location awareness, turns mobile devices into powerful community game devices, which can be viewed as multiuser environments (MMORPG) played in physical space. An example is the game **Botfighters**, created by the Swedish company **It's Alive**. By allowing cell phone users to 'shoot' and locate other players, **Botfighters** transforms the physical urban space into a game arena.

I Like Frank, from the British group Blast Theory, is another example of a game/narrative/artwork created in the hybrid space that permeates urban and digital spaces.

The use of location awareness in cell phones is spreading quickly through Europe and Japan. With the i-mode, for example, people can use their mobiles to locate a restaurant, get driving directions, and even find friends who are nearby.

With the aid of nomadic technology devices, virtual social communities, in which members do not occupy the same contiguous space, now emerge in physical spaces. In this context, cell phones play an active role in creating new types of communication and social networks. ImaHima, for instance, is a type of mobile Instant Messenger which beeps every time a user in your buddy list is within a specific distance radius.

Multiuser environments in cyberspace have frequently been regarded as utopian spaces in which users could project their imagination. When communities are shaped in a hybrid space, mobile phones become new media tools for creating novel and unpredictable imaginary spaces, re-narrating cities. Fixed Internet users do not have the ability to move through physical space. But the emergence of nomadic interfaces represents a chance for such imaginary spaces to be enacted and constructed in physical space.

Nomadic technologies have a twofold role in the construction of playful/narrative spaces. First, they allow virtual spaces to be mobile, bringing them into the physical world. Second, when used to play games, they free the game from the game board or the computer screen, making it possible to use the city space as the game domain.

Communities on the Internet have been formed independently of the physical location of their members. With nomadic technology devices, it is possible to communicate to people who are both distant and nearby. Location awareness embedded in mobile devices strengthens the connection to physical spaces, creating a new geography that is connected with and shaped by mobile networks.

Challenging a cyberspace dogma by which many claimed geography was dead, in the mobile era geography indeed matters — because connections on mobile networks are largely dependant on the user's position and movement in space. Mobile networks can be viewed as a digital layer that stands on the physical space, subjected to weather conditions and users' movement inside the cells.

In this sense, mobile phones can be perceived as writing devices. No, this has nothing to do with typing SMS or writing in a restricted sense, like producing written text. Writing in a broader sense means the creation of narrative and

imaginary spaces. Cell phones are new media devices writing in physical spaces or, better, in hybrid spaces.

The emergence of nomadic interfaces, however, does not mean that graphic user interfaces (GUI) and simulated spaces will disappear. Rather, mobile interfaces make us aware of the importance of physicality when dealing with digital spaces. Simulation spaces will continue to have important roles in disciplines such as medicine, engineering, and art.

Moreover, online multiuser environments will last as an alternative form of communication and sociability. Cyberspace, in this sense, is not gone. The emergence of new interfaces does not erase previous ones, especially if their roles do not completely overlap. As the television did not replace radio, also mobile applications, such as games and location-based services, will not replace simulated environments on the Internet. At least in the short run.

Mobile phones do not have the same graphic capabilities as large monitors, head mounted displays, or projection screens, but mobile technology is (currently) not about visualizing information spaces. Rather, it is about embedding new information in physical space. Because they are part of everyday experience, they are embedded technologies.

Hybrid spaces include features from communities in physical spaces, as well as from cyber-

communities, creating a more extensive means of communication and interaction among people. Virtuality is an essential element for promoting sociability in urban spaces, and to re-conceptualizing physical space. With mobile technologies, virtual environments are no longer detached from our physical world.

Dr. de Souza e Silva is an Assistant Professor in Communications. This article won the Opinion Award in trAce and Writers for the Future's New Media Article Competition, and is reprinted here with her permission. If these ideas interest you, check out Dr. de Souza e Silva's course offerings in the course ads on page 8. ❖

