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## **Playful Mobile Communication: Services Supporting the Culture of Play**

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### Abstract:

Communication has many functions; from linguistics to social psychology, there is ample evidence that communication fundamentally defines our ways of being, which is the reason changes in communicational practices and technologies are particularly interesting. This article focuses on the recent developments in playful mobile communication, firstly discussing play and playful practices in general, then moving on to contextualise the discussion in terms of contemporary mobile technology. Not just restricted to formal game play (*ludus*) but also including more improvisational forms of being playful (*paidia*), mobile play allows us some creative distance from the routine ways of communicating and is consequently more free-form than the more immediately utilitarian communicative acts. Playfulness also has certain distinctive features and it is possible to identify and discuss playfulness as it is expressed in the design of new tools for communication, as well as in the communicative practices and attitudes adopted by the participants. This article provides an introduction to the study of playful communication, and proposes three key evaluation criteria for playfulness. It then proceeds to test these criteria in contemporary playful mobile communication services.

Keywords: play, mobile communication, mobile games, game studies, play studies, playfulness, creativity.

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## Introduction: Play and Playful Communication

Along with the increasing adoption of information and communication technologies, new kinds of communicative practices are evolving. It is becoming easier and more common to be accessible via mediated communication whilst travelling or being simultaneously engaged in other daily activities. At the same time, the digital games in mobile devices have opened up new opportunities for game play. No longer restricted to single player sessions in front of a personal computer, digital games are being extended to social use and linked to social networking services. New generations of smartphones provide for download and use a rich range of utility and game applications, constantly expanding the reach of digital game play. In this article I will take a look at the emerging forms of play in the field of mobile communications, and start by clarifying what playfulness means in this context.

The cultural history of games reaches far and wide, yet much of our cultural and social relations with play have not yet been subject to research. In his classic essay into the cultural history of play, *Homo Ludens* (1955 [1938]), Johan Huizinga positioned 'play impulse' as the root of all culture, yet also as being something that is outside of the ordinary order of things – play is capable of utterly absorbing the player, but there is no material interest as the primary motivation for play. We enjoy playing for its own sake and play activities create their own subset of reality, within which the rules of play determine the order of things (Huizinga 1955 [1938]: 9-13.) The human flexibility in navigating between the 'play frame' and other contextual frames in social situations has further been analysed by the sociologist Erving Goffman (1961; 1974).

The state or quality of being playful is not exclusively a property of games and their players. Research exists that suggests that playfulness can be approached more generally as a personality trait, and that being playful in everyday life is beneficial as it can alleviate anxieties or depression, or facilitate friendship development (Barnett 1991; 1998; Sias et al. 2008). The psychological measurements of playfulness dedicate attention to defining characteristics in playful personality, such as being 'fun-loving', having a sense of humour, being capable of enjoying 'silliness' or being informal and whimsical (Schaefer & Greenberg 1997). Barnett (2007) has produced a working definition of playfulness for personality study purposes:

Playfulness is the predisposition to frame (or reframe) a situation in such a way as to provide oneself (and possibly others) with amusement, humor, and/or entertainment. Individuals who have such a heightened predisposition are typically funny, humorous, spontaneous, unpredictable, impulsive, active, energetic, adventurous, sociable, outgoing, cheerful, and happy, and are likely to manifest playful behavior by joking, teasing, clowning, and acting silly.

(Barnett 2007: 955.)

The exact usefulness of such definition through a precise catalogue of characteristics is no doubt limited, as we are likely to understand the associated adjectives and activities in many different ways. There are many cultural and even individual differences in how fun, humour or sociable behaviours are expressed and interpreted. It is no surprise however, that the study of play in general is notoriously vague in defining its object. One of the leading scholars of play, Brian Sutton-Smith, has suggested that play phenomena can most fruitfully be perceived in the multiple ambiguities that intersect or cut through playfulness. In addition to game playing, Sutton-Smith includes also wordplay, daydreams, taking photographs, playing music, participation in celebrations and many other things like risky mountain climbing, to the field of play phenomena (Sutton-Smith 1997: 4-5). We can nevertheless utilise at a general level the key underlying qualities (humour, spontaneity and a tendency towards social and enjoyable experimentation) to outline some criteria that are useful for analysing and understanding playfulness in the context of mobile playful communications.

In game studies, play is commonly defined as free activity within a more rigid structure, which is formed by game rules and other game elements. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman who are probably the most well-known proponents of this view, conceptualise game play as a special kind of a formalised subset of action, within various 'ludic activities' which in turn, are situated within the even more general category of 'being playful' (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004: 304). Fundamental to the discussion of rules and freedom in playfulness is the distinction Roger Caillois introduced by identifying two forms of play, *paidia* and *ludus*. According to Caillois, it is possible to approach each kind of game or play form with either an explicitly rule-bound, formalised mind-set (*ludus*), or with a more unstructured, spontaneous and playful mentality (*paidia*). (Caillois 2001: 27-36.) Gonzalo Frasca has developed Caillois' theory further and noted how certain games are more clearly designed for a formally defined *ludus* play style – they are typically focused on winning and losing, the counting of points, and they generally provide players with clearly defined goals in the game play. In contrast, games designed with more open goals, exploration, experimentation and improvisation are more likely to invite a *paidia* style of free, playful behaviours. (Frasca 2003.) This relation between the user and the designed styles and capabilities of use is called 'affordance' and it has been suggested that the relationship between game and player is fundamentally based on the affordances that game elements allow (Pinchbeck 2009). Also tools for mobile communication can include non-intended affordances, thus facilitating *paidia* style improvisation and playfulness.

When the perspectives of play and playfulness are applied to the fields of communication, a somewhat widespread and albeit scattered research interest emerges. Linguists like Roman Jakobsson (1960) have been interested in communication that takes place 'for its own sake'. In Jakobsson's theory about the functions of language, it is particularly the poetic and phatic functions that serve purposes that are typical of playful acts of communication. Whereas poetic communication explores the expressive potentials of language for its own sake, in the phatic mode of communication the main interest is focused in maintaining contact with the other party. Wordplay for example, can thus both embody motives such as intellectual curiosity and artistic creativity, as well as satisfy the need to entertain others and maintain social contacts. (Jakobsson 1960.)

Playful communication can be seen in the wider context of humour and how it affects the tone and character of social situations. Sigmund Freud's theory of humour emphasised the protective and complex character of jokes. The curiously exiting and releasing power of jokes resides according to Freud, in the various double meanings and psychic evasions that allow us to indirectly express sexual or aggressive thoughts through laughter (Freud 1989). Philosopher Simon Critchley has observed the nucleus of humour as lying in the disjunction between how the things are and the way they are represented within a joke. In contrast to Freud's view of humour as being a discharge of repressed energy, Critchley's view emphasises the productive character of humour as incongruity. There needs to be a shared understanding of what constitutes joking or playful communication to start with, and shared humour is also an expression of social contract – the persons who playfully joke together, also implicitly share a certain kind of social world which contains the structures that joking plays with. As Critchley says: 'Joking is a game that players only play successfully when they both understand and follow the rules.' (Critchley 2002: 4.)

Following these two approaches to humour that we could term as 'therapeutic' and 'social-aesthetic', the study of playful communication can be seen to explore both how people utilise playfulness and humour for psychic survival, and for constructing and supporting shared performances. Karen Grainger, for example, has studied verbal play on the hospital ward, and suggested that while humour for patients appears to alleviate their anxieties, decrease feelings of social distance and provide a seemingly friendly outlet for underlying hostilities, humour can also be as a form of social control. Her data points out how playful communication functions differently in different social situations and can take the form of 'inclusive teasing' as well as 'exclusive', aggressive teasing, where a patient might be required to participate in his or her own ridicule (Grainger 2004). The meaning and significance of playful communication and associated practices are thus not uniformly positive but can rather serve multiple uses and purposes.

There are also notable theories that frame all play *as* communication, but make important distinctions that qualify how such play-communication operates. Gregory Bateson has written that play should be understood as being characterised by a meta-communicative act; for example, a puppy that ‘play-fights’ with another one may make a playful nip, which according to Bateson both ‘denotes the bite, but it does not denote what would be denoted by the bite’ (Bateson 1976: 121). There are meta-communicative and contextual clues that help the other puppy to understand that the play-fighting is intended as fun, rather than as real aggression. Richard Duke has proposed that games can and should be designed to carry a message, and that simulation games go beyond the texts, maps or physical models that are created to represent various phenomena. Simulation gaming allows participants to act out different ‘what if’ situations, exploring alternative futures in a problem-based and holistic manner – hence he calls gaming ‘the future’s language’. (Duke 1974: 11, 49-60.) In contemporary video game studies, approaching game play as communication has not been the dominant paradigm, even if there have been studies published that look into games as being able to convey persuasive messages (Bogost 2007) or become an element in the field of news and information delivery (Bogost, Ferrari and Schweizer 2010). I have suggested that the dominant communicative mode of games is based on the combination of *semiosis* (meaning-making through symbolism and representation) and *ludosis* (meaning-making through playful action) (Mäyrä 2008: 18-19).

From the aforementioned studies of playful personality traits, humour, play and game studies, certain criteria for analysing playfulness can be identified. For the purposes of this paper, I recognise the following as being the primary characteristics of playfulness in a service or application: (1) the service supports spontaneous use (‘free play’), (2) it promotes surprising and unusual combinations and contents (‘creative fun’), and (3) it signals that the service is open for fun activities for their own sake (‘non-instrumental leisure’). We can thus analyse conditions for playfulness by looking at the design of communicative tools and associated emergent user cultures, from the perspectives of spontaneous exchanges, surprising contents, and meta-communicative signals for self-purposeful fun, as opposed to merely instrumental usefulness. The next section of this article will introduce some of the forms playfulness has taken in the development of mobile communications, and then the discussion will move on to take a closer look how the above criteria for playfulness suit contemporary mobile communication services.

### **Emergence of Mixed Reality Mobile Play**

Mobile phone games are just a small subset of all playful uses of mobile technology. A game application is clearly designed for play, but human ingenuity is also capable of finding or imposing playfulness into non-intentional contexts. The negotiable and flexible contextual aspects of game play gain special emphasis in mobile gaming and communication situations. When discussing and setting up a traditional board or card game session, it is more or less clear who the participants are and what the gaming situation means for them. In anonymous online play, such factors are not always clear and when the participants are accessing the game with mobile devices, it is not even clear where they are and what restrictions their current situation might impose upon their participation. Markus Montola (2005) has studied such shifts in the boundary conditions of play, and proposed a definition of ‘pervasive games’ that involves expanding the classic game play situation so that its basic spatial, temporal and social boundaries become ambiguous. In doing so, it is no longer necessarily clear where game play takes place, when the game is going on, and who is participant and who is just a bystander (Montola 2005). Yet, for most social contexts, such key factors like knowing who the participants are and their intentions, are central elements for making sense of the situation. Game play is an example of an activity which may hold a completely opposed significance for different people (Bartle 1996; Kallio, Mäyrä and Kaipainen 2011).

Play with mobile technology has attracted increasing interest since the early 1990s, but it is only during the last decade that mobile information and communication technologies have matured and reached the scale

of millions of daily users. From early on in the field of mobile play, a divide between 'mobile handset games' and 'truly mobile games' emerged. The first of these two concepts is related to the adaptation and publication of traditional computer and video games to small screen devices like mobile phones and handheld gaming consoles. The latter is dealing with the more futuristic potentials provided by mobile technology and devices that combine communication, user identification, positioning and other sensor information. To provide an example of this development, the early Swedish location-aware game *BotFighters* (2001) relied on GSM cell positioning and SMS messages for delivering commands and receiving gaming information. The real-life location of players was used to approximate the position of in-game battle robots, meaning that streets were superimposed with a fictional battlefield (Sotamaa 2002; Rheingold 2002). Potentially even the overall experience of daily life starts to change while participating in this kind of game, with the fantastic and the mundane mixing and co-existing in ever changing combinations.

The experiments our research team made with location-aware gaming in Finland in early 2000s provided some interesting insights into the nature of mixed reality play. In preparing *The Songs of North*, (a research game created through a player-centred design process; see Ermi and Mäyrä 2005), we used various illustrated gaming scenarios to assess potential players' reactions to game operations, before they would be implemented in the location-aware game prototype. Some of the initial concerns our informants had were related to the sense of player control and security. The possibility to stay anonymous was important for players, and the adoption of imprecise GSM location technology naturally prevented any attempts of stalking behaviour. The players also requested the possibility for rich in-game communication and team play. An interesting feature that we did not have time to fully develop and test was related to players' ability to write virtual 'scrolls' that could be dropped and found in real locations. The initial tests suggested a potential for fun interpersonal communication and user-created gaming content, like treasure hunts based on virtual trails of clues that players had left for other players to find, and which led from place to place and contributed to the construction of narrative continuity. (Ermi and Mäyrä 2005; Ekman et al. 2005; Mäyrä and Lankoski 2009.) Such trails of virtual clues and treasures could constitute a distinctive form of playful mobile communication in the future, as location-awareness becomes a more generally embedded feature of mobile user cultures.

Virtual graffiti is one of the more interesting developments in user-created content created through playful mobile communication. Graffiti is by definition public, unsanctioned writing or inscription, and much of it is political, humorous or irreverent by nature (Rahn 2002). The official uses of mixed or augmented reality technologies have often been related to the needs of commerce or tourism. For example, both the *Visby Under* project in Sweden (Ericsson 2003) and the *TimeWarp* project in Germany (Herbst, Braun, McCall and Broll 2008), aimed at encouraging an exploration of the history or mythology, as well as the streets and sights of a city. The use of mobile equipment in this kind of augmented reality tourism application allows players to experience the presence of objects and beings that are not part of their physical, real world surroundings. In practice, this means using a hand-held terminal in order to hear sounds and see images or animations that are programmed to become available only at certain places, or after accessing virtual keys or other objects. In virtual graffiti this power of augmented expression and perception has been passed into the hands of common users.

The most popular application available for this kind of use, *Layar* (2009) is technically based on the combined capacities of a smartphone's camera, compass, accelerometer and GPS, so that the user gets an impression of looking through a 'magic lens' into a landscape that moves as the smartphone is pointed at different directions and digitally augmented by additional layers of floating objects and images. The layers have to be created explicitly for 'virtual graffiti', a style of tagging, commenting and decorating the city surroundings, but also in overlaying the surroundings with various kinds of location-aware data from other sources like *Wikipedia* (the open, collaborative encyclopaedia) or *Instagram* (a popular social service for sharing smartphone photos). For example, by launching the Layar application today in Tampere, Finland, with the Instagram layer turned on and looking around through the lens of my smartphone, I can

immediately see about ten photos floating in mid-air around me – mostly family photos and winter landscapes. Touching on a floating image provides me with more details such as the photo date and an option to get map directions to the original location of the photo. With over ten million installed clients at the time of writing (autumn 2011), Layar has managed to gain a popular acceptance that goes beyond that of the classic augmented reality applications that have typically relied on cumbersome head-mounted displays to project additional information on the surrounding world (van Krevelen and Poelman 2010). We are at the threshold of augmented reality messaging, games and playful exploration becoming natural for mainstream mobile phone users. The most popular mobile applications are games, weather and those which are social networking related (Nielsen 2011), and in the rest of this article the aim is to discuss in more detail how particularly social networking has stimulated the growth of mobile playful communication.

### **Playful Mobile Photo Play: Flickr**

Historically, mobile communication devices have suffered from limitations of bandwidth, and consequently text-only information has comprised majority of online content that mobile users have been able to access. SMS messages and early WAP (Wireless Application Protocol) services are examples of information and interaction packed into very tight packages. Mobile broadband and more capable handsets that are able to process and display rich media have marked a transformation in the potentials of mobile communication. The speed of change has been considerable. According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), there were 5.9 billion mobile phone subscriptions in the world in 2011, and mobile broadband subscriptions had grown 45 % annually over the previous four years. ITU reports that in 2011 there were twice as many mobile broadband subscriptions as fixed broadband subscriptions. (ITU 2011.) The growing role of pictorial information in mobile communications has related not only to the increasing bandwidth, but also to modern smartphones predominantly being equipped as camera phones.

One of the leading photo sharing services, *Flickr* (2004), is an interesting example of the role of playfulness in mobile communications, both because of the user cultures that have grown inside the service and also for historical and service design reasons. Flickr was originally born as a spin-off from an online games project titled *Game Neverending*. The developers came up with a way to socially tag and share photos, and decided to pursue a photo sharing service as their main interest. (Monnin 2009.) The playful roots of Flickr can still be detected however, in certain key design features that may have also contributed to the popularity of the service – in 2011 there were 51 million registered users and nearly 80 million monthly visitors to Flickr (Yahoo 2011). Social metadata is one feature, the secret ranking algorithm ‘interestingness’ is another and the latter can be compared to the functions of the ‘high score’ lists of games. The spreading popularity of mobile photography is another powerful driver in the growth of services like Flickr. The Apple iPhone 4 was ranked as the most popular photography device used to take the photos uploaded into Flickr in 2011, as all available camera information was compared: it is important to see Flickr as a service that relies on the spread of mobile, user-created Internet. The mobile and contextually meaningful character is visible in the millions of snapshots that are being uploaded from mobile devices in various daily situations. The browsing of photos based on their geo-location is among the key ‘explore’ options the service allows.<sup>1</sup>

While assessing the degree of playfulness in Flickr, the first evaluation criterion addresses the degree of spontaneity it supports. When launched in 2004, Flickr was one of the first in the new line of services dubbed ‘Web 2.0’ to take full advantage of tagging. Tags are improvised, user-created terms that can be used to categorise, describe and search content in different ways. When shared, and adopted to use by a group of people, tags expand into a socially meaningful system that has been called ‘folksonomy’ (Vander Wal 2007). In terms of information management, there are benefits and downsides to such improvisational naming systems in that whilst the barrier to entry is very low, the same tag can be adopted to describe completely different phenomena (Mathes 2004). There exists an inherent ambiguity in social metadata, but in terms of playfulness, that can also be perceived as a benefit. When a search term produces surprising

collages of photos and discussions, it is more likely to stimulate free, playful behaviours than would a photo archive organised in a strictly logical manner.

Spontaneous interpersonal exchanges, original content creation and surprising combinations (the second evaluation criterion) are all in ample evidence in the Flickr Groups, which are discussion and photo sharing areas created by users of the service. There are group areas which feature posts with explicitly game-like rule-sets, like 'The Best of Flickr' group, where the group creator invites participants to post only green photos, blue photos, or photos that need to be chosen from another user directly above them in the chain of discussion.<sup>2</sup> The playful photo sharing practices also involve participation in 'Catch me if you can' style simple photo trailing games, where one needs to match the topic, shape, colour or some other feature of the previous posted photo, and then present a new challenge to the next user. The interestingness algorithm on the other hand, has stimulated the growth of 'gaming the Flickr' practices. This means that a playful user aims to maximise the changes of his or her photo showing up in the 'Explore' area featuring the most interesting Flickr photos, usually through the clever use of tags, sharing in the right kinds of groups, or through different ways of gaining a high number of comments or 'favourite' mentions to one's photo. (Mäyrä 2011.) These user-created games or ludic activities are also evidence of the third evaluation criteria for playfulness: the separation of Flickr from being a strict utility application stems from a context where various meta-communicative clues clearly indicate it to be an area where fun and play are allowed.

To sum up, it is possible to detect multiple layers of playfulness intersecting in Flickr and how it is used. Flickr has encouraged its users to be spontaneous and imaginative with the selection of topic or composition of their mobile photographs; it has supported sharing mechanisms that allow the tagging, combining and commentary of photos in insightful and surprising ways, and in the process, the service has gained some distance from the utility photography software and services such as professional stock photography databases. There are also users who have moved from a free, *paidia* style of playful use into a more formally goal-oriented *ludus*, as they have started playfully 'gaming Flickr', while trying to manipulate the underlying 'interestingness' algorithm. As a mobile playful communication tool, Flickr nevertheless has its limitations. For example, the official Flickr mobile client does not allow participation in the group area discussions and the user is required to launch a mobile browser to do so. Consequently, Flickr may be considered a borderline case when evaluated as a mobile playful service. It should also be noted that the next generation mobile photo services like the aforementioned Instagram are currently in the process of becoming 'gamified' (made more game-like), as users and developers create playful practices on top of their mobile photo streams.<sup>3</sup>

### **Being Playful in the Social Networks**

A wide range of playful practices that include 'playing the system' (Stenros 2010) are also in evidence in other networking services, such as *Facebook* (2004) and *Twitter* (2006), both popular as mobile applications. In Twitter for example, the expressed purpose of the service is finding the 'latest information', as users share short messages with a maximum length limit of 140 characters ('Tweets') with their followers (Twitter 2011). Much of the information that Twitter users share is transitory and personal in nature, appearing from mobile phones that are used in mundane contexts. This has led it undergoing a paradigmatic case of trivialization within (social) media. A survey has claimed that when broken down into analysis, over 40 per cent of Tweets fall into a 'pointless babble' category, e.g. 'I am eating a sandwich now' (Kelly 2009). The actual informational value of this kind of tweet might however lie in the act of communicating itself. Referring back to Roman Jakobson (1960); the steady stream of millions of tweets can indeed be seen to serve some important social functions, by maintaining a sense of informal togetherness and contact between physically removed people. Social media researcher danah boyd has pointed out with her colleagues how various conversational practices and norms have emerged in Twitter, like the use of 'retweeting' other peoples' tweets for recognition, support, commentary and other reasons. One practice is related to the popular 'RETWEET THIS UNTIL IT TRENDS' appeal: a playful, serious or

sometimes even political attempt to make a particular topic so popular in Twitter that it would appear in the 'trends' listing of the service. (boyd, Golder and Lotan 2010.)

Facebook has grown quickly to become the leading social networking service. The typical way to access Facebook used to be through a web page in the browser of a personal computer, but this has been rapidly changing. In December 2011, Facebook reported that already half of its 845 million monthly active users used a mobile product to access the service, with a total of 425 million monthly active mobile users (Facebook 2011). Considering the melange of various jokes, funny cat pictures, baby videos and colourful commentary on different news items shared on the service, Facebook as a whole has grown into a treasure trove of playful communication. The range of content and activities that are available in Facebook has expanded greatly since its launch in 2004. Users have 'timelines' on their Facebook profile pages where they and their 'Facebook friends' can write short status updates, share photos, videos, and give links to interesting news or content related to Facebook applications. The single most popular form of media sharing is the uploading of photos; six billion Facebook photo uploads were reported every month in 2011, making the service the largest photo collection on the Internet, with over 100 billion estimated photos (Mashable 2011).

Game play has an important role in Facebook and many of the most popular Facebook apps are games, for example *FarmVille* (2009). The mobile user can access Farmville either as a stand-alone application or by using the mobile web version of the game. Communication and sharing has a key role in Facebook game play, and these kinds of games have gained the genre moniker 'social games'. As simple, free-to-play games that rely on users to purchase additional items or powers for their business model, social games have been often criticised by active gamers, but they have become popular among tens of millions 'casual' game players (Kuittinen, Kultima, Niemelä and Paavilainen 2007; Rossi 2009). There are multiple opportunities for playful communication and self-expression in games of this kind. The complexity and threshold for play is very low, and the simple game elements can be organised in flexible ways, allowing modification of games to send personal messages to one's social network. Ben Kirman, who has studied emergence and playfulness in social games, argues that 'gaps' in game designs that are open enough to allow unplanned practices to evolve among the player communities are important in facilitating playful experiences. For example, allowing players to freely arrange and combine game objects has given rise to virtual farms where digital plants are organised in the shape of Elvis Presley's face, or into a playful replica of an 18th century English garden maze. (Kirman 2010.) Such emergent uses clearly match my previously adopted criteria for playfulness in communication: support for free and spontaneous user activity, the sharing of surprising contents and humorous signals for non-serious uses.

As mobile gaming in social network services is still a relatively recent development, its popularity and availability remains limited. When evaluated through the lens of mobile playful communication, it is particularly the text and photos attached to a Facebook or Twitter update that emerge as the most important arena for creativity and experimentation. For a smartphone user, the threshold for sharing a short comment or visual snapshot of an interesting sighting through the mobile application is rather low, as spontaneous use is supported right in the middle of daily activities. The continually updating stream of status updates, photos and links to diverse online contents, also fulfils the second evaluation criteria of playfulness as being stimulated through surprising combinations of content. Thirdly, even whilst many individuals access social media sites for professional reasons and it might even be an important part of their job (see e.g. Golden 2011), the wildly eclectic and non-serious nature of most Facebook and Twitter updates satisfies also the final criterion, the presence of meta-communicative clues for fun, play and humour. Today's social network services have already clearly established themselves as important tools and environments for mobile, playful communication. The existing applications and services do not, however, yet take full advantage of the affordances available in the mobile use context, such as mixed reality play.



## Playfulness through Location Sharing

My final examples of playful mobile communications relate to the location-aware social network service *Foursquare* (2009). The key affordances designed into Foursquare are the mobile users' ability to 'check-in', or to post their location through a smartphone app or the mobile website, whilst visiting various real-life locations like shops, banks, libraries or bars. Foursquare resembles a game in its competitive score keeping mechanisms and virtual rewards: being the person to do most check-ins to a certain venue will provide that user with an honorary title ('mayor' of that venue), and certain combinations of check-ins will produce virtual badges that can be advertised online to one's social contacts. For example, the 'Local' badge is awarded to a user who has been at the same place three times in one week, and a 'Crunked' badge is granted for four different check-ins during one night out.<sup>4</sup> It is also possible to get small material rewards or discounts through check-ins registered in participating establishments.

Appraising the user culture of the service, two main areas emerge where users have invented playful, communicative uses for Foursquare. The first involves a playful selection and commentary of venues while doing check-ins, and the second, in showing creativity while registering new venues to the service. Locations like good restaurants or international airports may be used to represent and comment on a certain kind of personality or life-style. In contrast, a check-in registered to a site like a public toilet or supermarket may be used to make an ironic comment in the status update stream. Henriette Cramer and colleagues (2011) have studied Foursquare and the motivations for location sharing in general. They noted how people share information that they feel is interesting, that enhances their self-representation or that leads to serendipitous interactions. Cultivating a sense of togetherness is also an important motivation, as well as the role of location updates when used as reassurance about all being well among friends and family. Some people are motivated to play well in order to gain Foursquare mayorships and badges, whilst some use the service actively in order to find and explore interesting places. Cramer and colleagues also note interesting conflicts surrounding some of the playful communicative practices seen in Foursquare. Utilitarian uses like family coordination or getting useful recommendations through friends' check-ins was found to be important for many users, and playful or whimsical Foursquare uses conflicted with the associated utilitarian norms. Some users gain pleasure from creating 'fantasy' venues, or for registering places for ironic commentary such as 'annoying traffic jam', which are frowned upon by more seriously minded users. (Cramer, Rost and Holmquist 2011.)

The service providers also try to remove obviously 'fake' locations from the system, however the Foursquare app will regularly display the nearby 'official locations' list interspersed with various humorous, user-created additions. For example, today a location titled 'Love Cave' appears to be popular somewhere in the University of Tampere main campus. Assessing the service through my selected criteria for playfulness in communication reveals it as playful in a multifaceted manner: (1) Foursquare is open for playful uses and behaviours through the selection of places where to check-in, and in how the accompanying comments and possibly photos are shared to one's social networks; (2) Foursquare also allows users to add locations to the public contents of service, opening it up for humorous, surprising, sometimes even controversial uses; and (3) the service rewards virtual badges and titles for real-world activities, allowing mundane daily shopping trips become reframed as parts of a playful achievement. It is no wonder Foursquare has also become the epitome of successful gamification, or the use of game mechanisms in web services and mobile applications (see e.g. Zichermann and Cunningham 2011). The borderline of business and leisure, or utility values and free play are dissolved in a service like Foursquare. Among the examples selected, Foursquare emerges most clearly as both playful and also 'truly mobile' communication service.

## Conclusions: Towards a Culture of Playfulness

This article has aimed to provide an introduction to the evolution of mobile play and playful communication during the recent history of smartphones and mobile internet services. By creating a synthesis of studies of games, play, humour and playfulness as a personality trait, a threefold evaluation criteria was developed and then followed as a guideline whilst evaluating recent developments in mobile photo sharing, social networks and in location-aware services. The outcome of this brief analysis suggests that support for spontaneity and free play, the sharing of surprising contents for 'creative fun', and having services open for fun activities for their own sake, appear indeed to be some of the hallmarks of contemporary mobile, playful communication. The exercise has also shown how thoroughly such playful features and user behaviours permeate popular contemporary communication tools, suggesting a need for more detailed research. Following pioneering researchers like Bateson (1976) or Duke (1974), who see play as (meta-)communication, we can approach the services analysed in this work as sites for educating ourselves in the area of new modalities for playful interaction – environments where the language and culture of playfulness are developed daily.

Considering the range of available examples, it also appears that we would profit from adopting a more nuanced categorization in the expanding field of playful communication. Firstly, we should distinguish game play that is realised through particular forms of communication, e.g. by remotely controlling and communicating with an online game through a mobile application. Secondly, this should be differentiated from communication that is framed or designed as a game by the users themselves – e.g. the gaming that takes place with Flickr or Twitter system rankings. Thirdly, there is a subfield of playful communication that has not been discussed in this article, but which relates to games and ludic activities that are applied and used for carrying messages. For example, Alternate Reality Games have been designed for political, educational, social or marketing purposes. These three categories correspond to three mutually complementary perspectives: game play as communication; communication as a game and the game as the message. Having such a more comprehensive picture of playfulness is also useful for providing stimulus for reflection around evolving trends like pervasive gaming and the gamification of society (Montola, Stenros and Waern 2009; McGonigal 2011). As the technological potential for mediated play increases, we are also likely to witness the increasing omnipresence of playful, game-like acts and exchanges of various kinds, and also the conscious application of game mechanics in non-leisure contexts.

Be it game play, utilitarian practices focused on communicating and sharing information or playful behaviours that feature aspects of both – it is obvious that many contemporary smartphone users with their game applications, Facebook, Foursquare and Twitter are often engaged in all of these at some point of their day. The expanding range of play and a growing potential for playful self-expression in mobile media appear to increasingly permeate our daily lives at work as well as at leisure. The most far-reaching implications concern the evolution of an entire culture and society into directions where the playful mode dominates. The rise of playfulness in culture and society can be related to several developments, one of which is the increasing self-reflexivity and role-play in the presence of constant change. Zygmunt Bauman has described this as a change from 'solid' to 'liquid' modernity, where careers become uncertain and lives fragmented (Bauman 2000; 2007). Mobile communications bear witness to developments where everyday contexts become arenas for game play or venues for the expression of a playful attitude. The participant in playful communications is simultaneously constructing and expressing social identity, while also playfully distancing herself from it. As such, it becomes harder to distinguish what is meant as factual communication, and what is a fictional, ironic or playful gesture. The rise of playfulness is visible as a more general trend in Western media and culture, and is not limited only to game play (Stenros, Montola and Mäyrä 2007). There are many critical voices warning us against the outcomes from developments where our culture and society becomes subject to the demands of entertainment (see e.g. Postman 2006), but where the potential benefits from adopting a more active, problem-solving focused mentality derived from game play, is also gaining advocacy (Gee, 2003; McGonigal 2011).

Whatever the outcome of the critical and cultural debate will be, it is clear that new mobile applications and services are constantly being introduced that expand the range of mobile game play and the

opportunity for novel and playful communicative practices. Taken positively, this culture of playfulness can be interpreted as a challenge, or perhaps a counter-reaction to the widespread culture of efficiency. These applications and services may also be seen as a test for all of us, at an everyday level: how much room (if any) do I personally still have available for playfulness, improvisation and creativity? In the future, we can perhaps turn towards liberating potentials as we fight against stress and the narrowing of focus by opening our life to daily playful explorations and exchanges. However, we need to be equally aware of how the increasing involvement with playful communication tools and services are capable of overloading us with an endless stream of distracting messages. As such, the playful realities of tomorrow will likely require from us new competencies in managing our communications and controlling our lives.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> See both <http://www.flickr.com/places/> and <http://www.flickr.com/map/>.

<sup>2</sup> See the web page: <http://www.flickr.com/groups/the-best-of-flickr/>.

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. InstaMatch, an app that utilizes Instagram photos in a card-matching memory game: <http://tinyhearts.com/instamatch/>.

<sup>4</sup> See the full Foursquare badge listing at: <http://www.4squarebadges.com/foursquare-badge-list/>.

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