The waiting game
Complicating notions of (tele)presence and gendered distraction in casual mobile gaming

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, we consider the various manifestations of ‘presence’ and ‘place’ in the context of mobile gaming, arguing that the clichés surrounding gender and mobile games can be usefully analysed by way of a phenomenology of the practice of casual game-play. This analysis forms part of a broader study of young women and gaming in Australia; here, we focus upon the growing realm of young women who are studying to be game designers. Via a sample study of 17 university students aged between 18 and 30 years, we investigate the different attitudes, spaces, and modalities of presence particular to casual mobile gaming, and the types of engagement they afford. Complicating the stereotype that casual mobile gaming is ‘trivial’, we look at the different spaces in which these games are played—public transport, at home alone, waiting in queues—and the types of embodiment and engagement experienced by our respondents. In particular, we critically examine the complex, layered, and often coexisting modes of being present, not present, and in between when playing casual mobile games in both public and domestic spaces.

Introduction
As mobile technologies evolved from the 20th to the 21st Century, they were marked by the transformation from mobile communications into mobile media. One of the defining features of this paradigmatic shift was the rise of the active user to a position of playing a key role in the interactive levels of engagement and co-production of mobile media. Despite the ubiquity of mobile media in everyday life, this all-pervasive phenomenon has only recently gained critical attention. This paucity is especially

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apparent in one of the biggest gendered conflations surrounding mobile media and games—namely, that women play casual mobile games and males play ‘serious’ online strategy games. And yet, despite this view, we would argue that casual mobile gaming is a culturally significant mode of game-play. That is, by examining gendered engagement with mobile phones and mobile games, insights can be gained regarding the intimate relation between the user and their mobile phone and the consequent modalities of (located) presence, co-presence, and telepresence effected by this relation.

Unsurprisingly, early studies of the mobile phone can be traced to its formation and transformation from the landline. As with the landline, the emergence of mobile phone technology was marked by the extension of the mobile phone’s original intended use as a business tool to its use as a social and domestic instrument, particularly by younger women. This transformation from male business tool to vehicle for female social ‘gossip’ (Martin, 1991a; 1991b) and reproductive/social labour has indelibly marked the history of telephony. The first studies of mobile culture, around the early 1990s, tended to highlight the implicit role that gender played in the emergence and transformation of the business technology into a socio-cultural practice. Groundbreaking work by Ann Moyal (1992), Lana Rakow (1992), and Michele Martin (1991a; 1991b), for example, explored the transformation of the telephone from business tool to a feminised social and cultural artifact.

As Wajcman et al. (2008) note, critical accounts of mobile phone use often become involved in debates about traditional gendered divides ‘between the separate spheres for market work (male) and domestic work (female) wrought by industrialisation’ (Goggin & Hjorth, forthcoming). Thus, the mobile phone, and especially mobile gaming, are deeply implicated in debates around various forms of work-life conundrums that cut across gender, space, labour, technology, and capital within contemporary globalisation. The mobile phone can be read for its social, technological, economic, and creative properties, and yet, within this burgeoning area, gaps remain—most notably the role of mobile media as a cultural index (Goggin, 2006) and the way in which the rise of the mobile phone as a symbol and practice is permeated by gendered genealogies (Hjorth, 2003). This is most prevalent in the changing rubric of mobile gaming that includes various forms of engagement and play cultures, from games on mobile phones to portable game consoles such as PlayStation Portable (PSP) and Nintendo DS.
In this paper, we consider some of the ways in which modes of gendered engagement, play, and mobility occur through a sample study of 17 young women—all students in games programs and degrees hoping to become game designers or programmers in the industry. In particular, we examine casual game-play among our respondents, in order to critique attitudes about casual mobile gaming as a culturally insignificant or trivial, time-wasting activity. We begin by briefly outlining issues surrounding media convergence and the mobile phone, in order to contextualise mobile game-play and its spatial implications. We then focus on casual game-play on the mobile phone and critically interpret the relation between embodiment, presence, and space emerging from this practice. In particular, we consider how the activity of casual game-play can be understood in terms of a phenomenology of ‘waiting’, differing markedly from console or computer gaming. This analysis aims to provide a deeper and more complex understanding of the way mobile games effect particular experiences of presence and complexify the spatial relation between public and private.

Convergence in mobile media
As convergence leaves its mark in the first decade of the 21st Century, the ultimate exemplar is the mobile device within the games industry. Within contemporary culture, we can witness convergence occurring across various levels—technological, industrial, social, economic, and cultural (Jenkins, 2006a). Far from a mere form of communication, the mobile phone has become a multimedia device par excellence—a plethora of various applications that operate across aural, textual, and visual economies. It is in this space that we see an awkward transition in the history of the medium, from its beginnings as a social communicative device to its industry-hyped potential as a creative (and commercial) venture in an age of ‘participatory media’ (Jenkins, 2006b). As Katz and Sugiyama note, ‘users’ are no longer just passive consumers but have been transformed into ‘co-creators’ (2005, p. 79); in Bruns and Jacobs’s (2006) term, they are ‘produsers’. In short, the rise of mobile media is characterised by the rise of the active and creative user.

The convergence of the mobile phone with multimedia has seen the formation of a discursive space around mobile media, in which various histories, genealogies, and cultures combine. Thus, mobile media have gained much interest in terms of new media debates, particularly those focusing on one of the dominant phenomena of
globalisation, convergence (Jenkins, 2006a; Goggin, 2006). The reason why convergence has been so instrumental in mobile media is undoubtedly linked to the mobile's recuperation and deployment of the personal and intimate; thus, we would argue that convergence needs to be conceptualised within broader, historical processes of mediated intimacy. As Hjorth (2005) argues, for example, SMS re-ensacts 19th Century letter-writing traditions. Clearly, the intimate co-presence enacted by mobile technologies should be viewed as part of a lineage of technologies of propinquity (Milne, 2004; Hjorth, 2005; Kopomaa, 2000). Moreover, mobile technologies need to be seen as further eschewing the distinctions between public and private, work and life, an effect begun by older domestic technologies such as television and radio (Williams, 1974; Morley, 2003). For Kopomaa (2000), mobile media create a new 'third' space in between public and private space, while Morley (2003) observes that the mobile phone has further collapsed the distinction between public and private, as it no longer brings the public into the private, as was the case for broadcast television, but inverts the flow so that the private increasingly infiltrates and inhabits the public domain.

It is this transposed interweaving of the public/private and work/domestic domains in mobile phone use, combined with the mediatisation of the mobile phone as an imaging and gaming device, that lends itself to a different understanding of the gendered use of communication and media technologies. This is because the domestic, private, and personal become quite literally mobilised and micro-mediatised via the mobile phone—an intimate 'home-in-the-hand'—effecting at the same time a transformation of experiences of presence, telepresence, and co-presence in public spaces. In what follows, we aim to identify some of these transformations in the context of young women's experiences and perceptions of mobile game-play, using a phenomenological approach to describe individual micro-practices of casual and mobile gaming.

Case study: Girl gamers in Melbourne and Perth

This analysis forms part of a broader study of young women and gaming in Australia; here, we focus on the growing realm of young women who are studying to be game designers. Via a sample study of 17 university students aged between 18 and 30 years, we investigate the different attitudes, spaces, and modalities of presence particular to casual mobile gaming, and the types of engagement they afford. Though much has been made of the possibilities of location-based
and context-aware mobile gaming in current discussions about mobile media, none of our participants had played these types of games on their mobile phones, though 8 of the 17 respondents regularly played casual mobile phone games. The participants in our study—young women living in Melbourne (Victoria) and Perth (Western Australia)—can be seen as having a good, in-depth knowledge of various forms of game-play. For these respondents, the mobile phone is important and deployed frequently, as is the usage of broadband facilities from stationary computers both at home and at school, with many accessing the Internet for a variety of services, including online games, SNSs (Social Networking Sites or Systems), and e-mail, for up to five hours per day.

For example, one games student (aged 22) viewed her mobile phone as an essential component of social activity, using it mainly for texting friends (88%) and, to a lesser degree, voice calling (5%), MMS (3%), camera phone images (2%), and mobile games (2%). Having used the Internet regularly since 1998 for at least two hours every day, this respondent went online for SNS (30%), e-mailing (27%), information searching (40%), and games (3%). Similarly, an 18-year-old respondent used her phone primarily for SMS (65%), voice calling (15%), MMS (5%), Internet (5%), games (5%), and camera phone images (10%). Regularly accessing the Internet since 1997, she predominantly went online to play games (60%), search for information (20%), use SNSs (10%), send and receive e-mail (8%), and engage in peer-to-peer sharing (2%). An avid user of online games, she most often played massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) and browser-based role-playing games (RPGs), each at least five times per week, flash games (strategy, puzzle, tower defence, platform) once or twice a week, and browser-based strategy games at least once a day, all predominantly at home (90%). Another games student (also aged 18) used her mobile phone predominantly for texting and SMS ‘conversations’ with friends (60%), games/entertainment (20%), and creating camera phone images and movies (20%). Her computer-based Internet usage, accessed primarily at home, involved SNSs (70%), information searching (19%), games (10%), and e-mail (1%). Interestingly, this respondent didn’t play console games, preferring online games such as World of Warcraft and Counterstrike and mobile games such as Tetris, Bounce, and AlreadyThere. While much of her online game-play was conducted at home, her engagement with mobile games ran the gamut of different spaces—on public transport (20%), waiting for someone in a public space (50%), at home (20%), or at university (10%). As we will discuss in the following section, it
is this particular usage of mobile games across a number of cultural and spatial domains that positions mobile gaming as a unique form of game-play.

These female students are examples of highly active users of technologies, both professionally and creatively. As gaming increasingly becomes mainstream within Australian culture, it is these young women who will become some of the first to enter the industry as creative professionals, rather than as administrators. However, it is interesting to note that, while they are studying to be employed within the games industry, and regularly play games for more than four hours on a daily basis, they frequently spoke in contradictory terms about game-play as both a very enjoyable, challenging, and often enthralling activity and as a 'non-productive' and 'wasteful' form of leisure. One 18-year-old game student, for example, played games both by herself and with friends and viewed game-play as a 'fun' activity, allowing her to interact with friends in different ways, and also to 'make more friends'. When asked about mobile games, she said that she mainly played Solitaire, Ducky Tiles (matching corresponding tiles), Casanova (simulated dating game), and Insaneaquarium (saving fish from monsters). Like most of the other respondents, she frequently played mobile games on the train or bus to pass the time during the ride (80%) and, to a lesser degree, while waiting for people in cafes or at uni (15%), though generally she preferred to either play her DS or 'people-watch'. Lastly, on occasion, she played games at home to help her sleep or when there was 'nothing else to do' (5%). When asked to reflect upon how playing mobile games compared to other activities such as reading, watching television, or playing games on PCs, she noted:

They’re mainly a time-filler, which is why I play mobile games on public transport and very rarely at home. I don’t see gaming time as a productive use of time, so in the time I do play games, I’d rather play far more enjoyable PC games… For me, it really is just a time-filler while out and about.

Another 23-year-old prolific gamer stated that she mainly preferred playing games at home; her favourite game genres included adventure ('I like to explore and grow as the character does'), puzzle ('I like to flex my mind'), and some RPGs and first-person shooters (FPSs) ('I like fun, story-driven games'). Yet when asked about her mobile game-play, she admitted that she did play mobile games such as Snake and Bounce (phone) and Vortex (iPod), usually on transport (50%), while waiting for
someone (30%), and at home in her room (20%). Although she spoke of her game-play in largely positive terms—as exploratory, progressive, intellectually challenging, containing interesting narrative—she nevertheless viewed mobile gaming as a ‘last resort’, something she did while ‘waiting for someone or something’. Indeed, almost without exception, such games were not considered ‘real’ games—both by those who played them and those who didn’t—and the practice of casual mobile gaming was trivialised as ‘wasting time’ when ‘there’s nothing else to do’. Yet, despite the apparent insignificance of casual mobile games in the everyday lives of our participants, there are some critical insights to be gained from closer analysis of casual game-play, both in terms of emergent micro-practices of ‘distraction’ in today’s hyper-mobilised society, and in light of the rise of casual gaming more generally.

While the young women in our study are perhaps not representative of dominant gaming gender norms, they can be viewed as innovators in an industry increasingly embracing ‘casual’ gaming in a period marked by a blurring between casual and serious gaming (as evidenced by the popularity of the Nintendo Wii as a ‘non-expert’, family-friendly game interface). So how do these young women define mobile gaming and what are the prevailing attitudes? How are these attitudes transforming casual gaming as a consequential mobile media practice and as an indicator of women’s and young adults’ experiences of mobile media? In what follows, we articulate the casual mobile phone game as an integral part of the bodily performance of ‘waiting’ and ‘distraction’, and explore how the practice of mobile gaming affects one’s ‘environmental knowing’ (Brewer & Dourish, 2008), or the spatial and sensorial awareness of one’s immediate surroundings. Though, of course, casual gaming is not an activity exclusive to women’s use of the mobile phone, we suggest that the case study serves to highlight the imbrication of the mobile phone as a device to manage what Bissell (2007) terms the ‘body-in-waiting’—an everyday cultural practice that deserves some critical attention.

The body-in-waiting: Narratives of distraction and casual mobile gaming
Our interaction with mobile screens is rarely marked by the dedicated attentiveness we give to other screens; indeed, our ‘turning towards’ them is usually momentary (checking for a text or missed call), or, at most, can be measured in minutes. In fact, even in the seemingly committed practice of game-play, mobile phone engagement is
characterised by interruption, and sporadic or split attention in the midst of other activities, a behaviour quite distinct even from handheld console game-play on the Nintendo DualScreen (DS) or PlayStation Portable (PSP). This is recognised by the growing mobile phone game industry and its labelling of the ‘casual gamer’, who plays at most for five minutes at a time and at irregular intervals. Chesher (2004) suggests that console games are ‘sticky’, holding the player to the screen via both a quasi-visceral immersion in depth-perspective virtual space and a haptic attachment to the hand-controller and peripherals. Casual gamers, on the other hand, must deliberately avoid this ‘stickiness’ so that they are perpetually ready to resume their temporarily interrupted activities.

It has been argued that both MP3 players and mobile phones afford the auditory privatisation of public space, changing our co-proximate behaviour and evolving different ‘micro-acoustic ecologies’ (Helyer, 2007) in different ways. While MP3 players provide discrete ‘sound bubbles’, the mobile phone is a discontinuous device, puncturing time and intervening in the soundscape as users intermittently fill urban space with their own ‘noises’ of familiarity and intimacy (Helyer, 2007, n.p.). As Bull notes: ‘Mediated isolation itself becomes a form of control over spaces of urban culture in which we withdraw into a world small enough to control’ (2005). It is this notion of ‘mediatised isolation’ in the context of casual gaming that is of particular interest here. As we will suggest, the way in which the mobile phone as ‘third screen’ and casual game device is used to effect a mode of non-communicative co-presence when one is ‘alone’ in public is quite distinct from the much-discussed telepresent effects of talking or texting on the mobile, or from our telepresent immersive experience of first and second screens (television and computer).

The term ‘telepresence’ refers to the kind of ‘distant presence’ enabled by telecommunication devices. Thus, the very condition for telepresence—a ‘presence at a distance’—speaks of our capacity for ontic dispersion beyond the neat physical limits of the body, and our openness to the embodied distraction of televisual and telephonic spaces. The term distraction—originating from distrahere, or to pull in different directions—aptly describes how our attention becomes divided when we speak on the phone, send or receive a text message, or play a game on the mobile. It suggests that the locus of our perception is divided between the ‘here’ and ‘there’, such that we can know different times and spaces simultaneously, an effect that shifts the boundaries of what immediacy is, and how it is defined and experienced.
The contexts of casual gaming, however, point to how the mobile phone is often used not as a telepresent medium, but as a device for managing situations of both collective co-presence and solitary ‘waiting’. For the women in our study, when the mobile phone was used as a game device, it was frequently purposed for offline or casual gaming in particular circumstances and periods of fixed duration: waiting for friends, during journeys on public transport, to fill in time at home, to alleviate boredom, or as a break from other less desirable activities (such as study). Common answers to the question ‘What motivates you to play mobile games?’ included:

‘They are trivial time-wasters for when you have nothing else to do (but can be pretty fun sometimes).’

‘Generally, I play mobile games if I am bored somewhere, and have my phone on me, but don’t have anything else to entertain me.’

‘I play while waiting for my queue number to be called in a super crowded building; playing mobile games is the only interesting thing to do in order to distract myself from the pain of waiting.’

‘I can switch off from what’s going on around me but not totally—I can still pay some attention.’

‘They are OK when you have nothing else to do.’

These responses indicate a number of contexts for mobile phone game-play—‘waiting’, ‘boredom’, ‘time-filling’, and ‘switching off’—each of which describes a form of delay or ‘putting on hold’; that is, a complex variation of telepresent distraction enacted when co-present or co-proximate with unfamiliar others, or otherwise a solitary ‘in the meantime’ or ‘time-out’ activity. Thus, casual gaming can be seen as a mode of co-present telepresence—wherein one is simultaneously with-others and in-the-game: an intimate being-with-technology that takes place in the interstices of everyday life, in the gaps between productive and telic or goal-oriented activity.

From a phenomenological perspective, a body-in-waiting discloses a particular kind of being-in-the-world that demands a certain kind of corporeal ‘labour’. For many of our respondents, the mobile game became co-opted into this labour, filling and suturing the ‘dead’ or ‘fractured’ times and spaces that are ‘folded into everyday
corporeal existence' (Bissell, 2007, p. 281). Such work—categorised by what Bissell (2007) refers to as the various 'species' of waiting (p. 282)—can be understood in terms of the 'micro-bodily actions' and 'corporeal attentiveness' of specific modalities of waiting (p. 278, p. 285), identified above by our participants as 'waiting for a friend', 'on public transport' (waiting for the journey to end), 'filling in time' or 'switching off' (before commencing another activity), and 'alleviating boredom'. Clearly, when these modalities are combined with mobile media use, where the ready availability or 'handiness' of the device is easily deployed in the fissures of everyday life, complex choreographies and mobile-body relations ensue. We will describe two situations here as they appeared most commonly in our survey—waiting in a public place and boredom or 'time-filling'.

The activity of casual gaming while waiting for a friend or at a bus stop becomes another way of managing the corporeal intensity of impatience and alone-ness in public spaces, while at the same time maintaining an 'environmental knowing', or crucial peripheral awareness of one's spatial surroundings in readiness for the business of life to resume. The transient and non-dedicated attentiveness required by the small screen and casual game—you can 'switch off', but not totally—allows the user to remain alert to the 'arrival' that marks the end of waiting, yet able to avert their gaze from others and so cooperate in the tacit social agreement of non-interaction among strangers. For some of our respondents, this kind of engagement with the mobile screen provided a means of safe seclusion from unwelcome interaction in potentially risky situations of co-present waiting, yet allowed them to remain 'open' or attentive to the proximity of that risk. One commented, for example, that mobile game-play enabled her to avoid eye contact with 'drunks and weirdos'.

The experience of boredom in solitude was also frequently given as a 'motivation' for casual game-play, yet it poses somewhat different phenomenological conditions. Boredom is usually experienced as a corporeal irritation or restlessness, an agitated inertia in response to a current situation that holds no interest, both temporally and spatially. As post-Heideggerian theorist Svendsen (2005) suggests, time slows (confounding the regular continuity and linearity of time) and/or one wants to escape from the place where one is located; consequently, relief or distraction from boredom is often sought by occupying both the gaze and the hands. In other work, Richardson (2007) has noted the perpetual 'handiness' and habitual 'handling' of the mobile phone, even when not in use, and it is clear from our case study that the
intimate familiarity of hand-eye-screen couplings in mobile game-play effectively works to temporarily defer, suspend, or assuage the feeling of boredom. A number of our mobile game-playing respondents commented that they played casual games ‘while cooking’, suggesting that the boredom that crept into the brief hiatuses of solitary domestic activity could be effectively ‘time-filled’ by the ephemeral distraction of the casual game. This short-lived escape from one’s present time and place enacts another variation of telepresence, or, more precisely, an ‘in-between’ or transitory non-presence. In these various contexts, such active ‘performances of waiting’ problematise the notion that the body-in-waiting is a compliant and immobile body, suggesting instead that the mobile phone becomes co-opted into micro-practices of corporeal resistance and resilience.

Conclusion
In this paper, we have examined the various modes of casual mobile game-play among young women who are soon to enter the game industry as creative and technical professionals. In particular, we have focused on casual mobile game-play as it was experienced and corporealised, or embodied, by our sample of respondents, offering a more complex and nuanced interpretation of the stereotype that casual and mobile gaming is a trivial pursuit most often performed by female ‘non-experts’ or ‘non-gamers’. Using a phenomenological approach, we identified the ways in which casual mobile phone games are co-opted into the individual enactments of the ‘body-in-waiting’, and the various modalities of presence manifested by such practices. Although the tech-savvy participants in our study often viewed their own casual mobile gaming as insignificant and non-productive—an activity of little consequence scattered throughout the ‘fractures’ of more important everyday happenings—we suggest that such play is an indicator of emergent micro-practices of distraction in today’s hyper-mobilised society. That is, far from being inconsequential, the routines of casual mobile gaming reveal particular and shifting modalities of ‘being alone’ in both urban and domestic spaces.

References


