

## Playful identities and the mobile phone

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### Background

I am part of an interdisciplinary research project (conceptual-philosophical, media-theoretical, and qualitative-empirical) called 'Playful Identities'. Our aim is to investigate if and how digital media - in particular the internet, the mobile phone, and games - are transforming the (construction of) personal and cultural identities. To that end we will develop a theory of ludic identity that critically elaborates on Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity. I study the mobile phone. My background is in cultural anthropology. After the conference I will go to Indonesia for a two month empirical research. This piece is therefore still quite theoretical, an exploration of some of my thoughts and concepts I work with.

### Introduction

This paper looks at the influence of the mobile phone on the construction and experience of identity. The main argument is that mobile phone practices challenge three characteristics central to the narrative conception of identity: setting, plot, and character. I propose medium-specific properties of the mobile phone may impel us to complement the narrative metaphor by the metaphor of play and game.

### Narrative identity theory: stories mediating identities

Personal identity can be described as the construction, experience and expression of selfhood. Cultural identity can be described as a sense of belonging to a certain group on the basis of experienced similarity. Both give meaning, value and a sense of direction (end) to one's life. Through personal and cultural identities, people relate to themselves, others and the world around them. During our lives we change. We undergo personal development and are influenced by people and events. Yet how come most of the time we still feel to be a single person, a 'unified Self'? Paul Ricoeur (1992) says this relation is mediated by stories: "[S]elf-understanding is an interpretation; interpretation of the self, in turn, finds in the narrative, among other signs and symbols, a privileged form of mediation; the latter borrows from history as well as from fiction, making life story a fictional history or, if one prefers, a historical fiction." (Ricoeur 1992: 114 fn1).

By telling stories about our own life we come to understand past events and actions, ascribe meaning and value to our current situation, and carve out future directions and aims. Ricoeur makes a distinction between *idem* identity and *ipse* identity. *Idem* points to a sameness over time, being one and the same person, both quantitative - being an indivisible person - and qualitative - being consistent as a character. *Iipse* points to the experience we have of being a unified person, and to the capacity we have of taking initiatives. These two conceptions of Self combine two orders of causality in which people live: the physical order of causality (*idem*) and the intentional order of motives for action (*ipse*). Central with Paul Ricoeur is the *promise*, which is similar to the notion of *commitment* with another important narrative theorist Charles Taylor (1989: 27). These express our intention to remain the same person over time. We continuously reinterpret our own lives. At the same time we *promise* to be consistent as a character, we make a *commitment* to ourselves and to others to be the same recognizable and dependable person throughout our lives.

Ricoeur describes a threefold movement of narrative mediation:

*mimesis1*: We implicitly experience our being in the world as structured by narrative elements, such as plot, motive, character, setting. Thanks to this knowledge we can express our experiences and actions in stories. This is called *narrative prefiguration*.

*mimesis2*: We configure stories by bringing separate elements into a structure of logical unity, the narrative. The narrative has a beginning, an end, a time-based development (plot), has characters and personages that play a role, a location-based setting, and brings events in a causal relation to each other. New disruptive events and actions must be brought into this narrative unity. This is a dialectic of "discordant concordance" (Ricoeur 1992: 141). Ricoeur calls this *narrative configuration*.

*mimesis3*: We reflexively reconfigure ourselves by interpreting our stories, and those of

others. By a 'reading' of the plot, we understand ourselves and the changes we experience, and give our personality 'character'. This is called *narrative reconfiguration*.

### **From narrative to play: mobile phone challenges to narrative identity**

Narrative identity is a powerful image of identity construction. It intuitively 'feels right' to our literate society. But does the narrative, with its roots in oral and written culture, fit our contemporary digital culture? The influence of new digital media like the mobile phone on identity formation cannot be solely understood within the framework of narrative identity theory, I propose. Media-specific properties, I will argue, seem to stress ludic aspects of identity and challenge many of the characteristics of narrativity. This line of reasoning starts from the well-known proposition that each dominant medium creates its own metaphor for self-understanding.

### **what is play?**

Let us first briefly look at some ways play has been conceptualized. Dutch historian Johan Huizinga (1950) tries to find the essence of play. He sums up a number of characteristics: play is voluntary; it is not ordinary or real life but "only pretending"; it is limited in time and space; it creates order, *is* order; it is enchanting and captivating; it has a tension between uncertainty of the outcome and the players want for succes by his own exertions; it is guided by rules that create a temporary and illusionary play world; it creates a play community that lasts after the game is over; it is surrounded by an air of secrecy. Play functions "as a contest for something or a representation of something" (Huizinga 1950: 8-13).

French philosopher Roger Caillois (1959) elaborates on Huizinga's attempt to define play. He disagrees with Huizinga's view on play as mysterious and secretive, and as denuded of all material interest. He formally defines play as:

1. *Free*: in which playing is not obligatory; if it were, it would at once lose its attractive and joyous quality as diversion;
  2. *Separate*: circumscribed within limits of space and time, defined and fixed in advance;
  3. *Uncertain*: the course of which cannot be determined, nor the result attained beforehand, and some latitude for innovations being left to the player's initiative;
  4. *Unproductive*: creating neither goods, no wealth, nor new elements of any kind; and, except for the exchange of property among the players, ending in a situation identical to that prevailing at the beginning of the game;
  5. *Governed by rules*: under conventions that suspend ordinary laws, and for the moment establish new legislation, which alone counts;
  6. *Make-belief*: accompanied by a special awareness of a second reality or of a free unreality, as against real life.
- (Caillois 1959: 9-10).

Caillois distinguishes four kind of games: competition, chance, simulation, and vertigo (ibid 12). Important is his distinction between *paidia* (spontaneous, impulsive, joyous, uncontrolled fantasy) and *ludus* (absorbing, rule-governed, for its own sake and amusement, involving skill and mastery), which he sees as a two poles of a continuum (ibid 10, 27-35). This distinction coincides with the English *play* and *game*. Game researcher Gonzalo Frasca says a *game* differs from *play* not because it is rule-governed but because it has a result (Frasca 1999: 2).

Brian Sutton-Smith, education researcher originally from New Zealand, distinguishes between describing a playful mood, and describing the content of play. There is *playfulness* or disruptive *free play* and there is *play*: more circumscribed and serious, such as games, festivals and rituals (Sutton-Smith 1997: 147). This, I believe, coincides with Caillois' distinction between *paidia* and *ludus*. Sutton-Smith explores the immense variation of play conceptualizations. He distinguished between seven "rhetorics of play": 1. play as progress: child's play, adaptive; 2. play as fate: external might, 'tragic attitude'; 3. play as power: community statuses; 4. play as identity: tradition/events; 5. play as imaginary: creativity, innovation; 6. rhetorics of self: 'ludic culture'; consumerism; 7. play as frivolous: anti-serious, folly; reversal of all thing regular (ibid 9-11). While all of these rhetorics have some relation to identity, number 4 and 6 stand out. The former describes play as being part of what is

considered traditional culture: the rituals, annual events, etc. that bind people together. The latter on the other hand sees play as part of an individualized subjectivity that stresses personal development and growth (ibid: 175-177).

Play seems to pervade all domains of life. There is still much debate in contemporary game studies about the “ambiguities of play”. Theorists of digital games (ludologists) are in the initial phase of creating and defining their own field, like the debate about video games as either narrative or game (Raessens 2006). Instead of trying to define the essential nature of play or games, I am using the term for its metaphorical power, freely drawing on existing theories of play for understanding the influence of the mobile phone on new identities.

### **narrative setting**

Narrative presupposes that the events and actions that make up a person's life occur at one single place at a time, the setting. Settings themselves are narrative in character: they are ‘scripted’ and wrought with stories about how to behave in them, what roles to adopt. Joshua Meyrowitz argues that as societies grew more complex, a multitude of more or less distinct settings with thick boundaries were created. Workplace, home, holiday, leisure, places of consumption, public space, etc. became the loci of “increasing segregation of experiential spheres” (Meyrowitz in Nyíri 2003: 94). Central to a narrative identity is *being present* in a *single setting*. Cultural identities too are tied to settings, like (state) territories, or mythological spaces. We are *from* somewhere, we are *in* a place and we go *to* someplace (even after death, for those who believe in greater narratives). What happens to the setting under the influence of the mobile phone?

### *singularity of setting*

Where is mobile conversation and interaction taking place? Where are we when we make a phone call with our loved-ones 14000 kilometers away?

How does this influence our narrative sense of actions and events taking place somewhere? According to Caroline Bassett, mobile conversation connects at least four different spaces: two physical spaces, where the caller and the called are located physically, and two virtual spaces, the imagined conversational space by both caller and called (Bassett 2005: 39). When there are more people involved in the call this may multiply. One could add to this one or more other topical spaces talked about by the callers. To make matters even more complicated, people who are physically co-present, overhearing only one side of the conversation, are involved too. They may imagine multiple settings: the virtual space where the conversation takes place, the topical space where the actions and events talked about take place, and where the invisible other may be located physically. And that's only the communication part of the mobile phone. Mobile phones increasingly function as portable music and video players, as photo and video cameras, to access the virtual spaces of the internet, to engage in pervasive games, and as navigating devices (GPS). These uses add their own specific layers over the physical spatial layer. This often becomes so pervasive that distinctions between first order physical space and second order virtual space may no longer be so clear. Bassett describes how walking through the city while making a call. She feels “not entirely absent-mindedly, but not entirely intentionally either” (ibid). The pavement acquires an added meaning, while she enters into a playful game of stepping into squares and avoiding the borders. When physical space and virtual space blend, a kind of ambiguous *make belief* occurs. We have to imagine another setting and believe that the other person is there with us. Yet we know he or she's not actually present. Free after Mannoni: “I *do* know, yet still....”.

The mobile phone makes every setting full of “virtual doorways, opening into other places” (ibid :40). Place has become more ambiguous, it is no longer a setting with a single function and meaning. The oft-mentioned “time-space compression” - the speeding up of time and reduced importance of physical distance - that characterized our technological age may perhaps better be called time-space diffusion. Time-space compression still departs from the assumption that there is one unified narrative that binds time and space together. Rather, our experiences of time and of space become increasingly diffuse. We are in many places at the

same time and in many temporal modes while in the same place. The question is: does it make sense to bring all these disparate places and times under the umbrella of one single unifying story?

The idea of the logical unity of the setting in narrative theory has been challenged by Ajit Maan (1999). She argues an increasing number of people, particularly migrants, switch back and forth between multiple settings. Maan proposes a "internarrative identity" model, mediating as it were between different narratives. Such a model takes into account spatial discontinuities in people's lives and does not require spatial unity as a whole, but only requires coherence in the way we tell stories (Maan 1999: 58). The mobile phone in a sense makes every user a constant 'migrant' between different settings. The mobile phone challenges the logical coherence of the setting since it allows us to speak and act in multiple contexts in while at one physical location. What does this mean for our identities?

As we switch back and forth between contexts in which we play divergent and sometimes conflicting roles, diversions and contradictions in our stories come to the surface (Geser 2004). All of a sudden we find ourselves managing two very different front stages. In the same article quoted from above, Meyrowitz argues that electronic media have blurred the distinct experiential spheres which earlier defined our roles as adult or child, man or woman, at work or leisure, traditional hierarchies, etcetera (Meyrowitz in Nyíri 2003). The metaphor of play may help to understand this fragmented experience of setting as an alternating movement between multiple games. Meyrowitz gives a nice pass on playfulness when he says "...we, as global nomads, are able to violate the rules of physical movement and physical limits" (ibid: 97). Traditional closed settings can be seen as games with strict rules. To go stick with Bassetts' example, when you walked the pavement, you were related to that setting as either a walker, a stroller, a passer-by, a flaneur, a runner, etc. The mobile phone makes this relation more ambiguous. Calling dissociates the caller from his/her physical surroundings, yet at the same time reestablishes a new relation to that place, often a more playful one. Current day movement between those settings consist in "free play" as they constantly switch between being in- and out of the game, transgress definition of game boundaries, and how to take on a role in them. Participating in a setting involves a "willing suspension of disbelief", yet at the same time there is also a constant doubt and increased reflexivity about our roles in those games.

### **narrative plot**

In narrative theory the *plot* functions to bring events and actions into a logical temporal order. We create plots with a linear structure with a beginning and an end to create cohesion between seemingly disparate events and actions in our life. By making these events part of a greater story, we give them meaning *and* create a sense of direction to life as a whole. The plot is basically a mechanism of selection: what belongs into the story (concordance) and what doesn't (discordance).

#### *linear direction and causality of the plot*

I believe the mobile phone challenges some aspects of the narrative plot, such as the boundedness of events by a beginning (opening) and an end (closure). Licoppe and Heurtin point out however that mobile communication often is an ongoing conversation. Formal greetings and openings are not necessary (Licoppe and Heurtin in Katz & Aakhus 2002: 106). A call refers back to former conversations ("OK, so where we're we?"). It also opens up the possibility for future conversations ("listen, I'll call you back later"). Just like soap stories or gossiping, mobile phone conversations are often not self-contained chapters in a greater narrative, with a formal opening and closure. Instead they are part of a chain of events and actions. This sequential use of the phone has been described as "micro-coordination" (Ling & Yttri in Katz & Aakhus 2002: 143), although that term still presupposes using the mobile phone to establish a predefined goal which 'closes' a chain of communication. Many mobile phone conversations are never over. There is no point at which they are made into either concordant events that fit into the greater narrative, or discordant events that are left out.

Although Huizinga and Caillois seem to stress play's limitedness, others like Gadamer (1975) and Carse (1986; mentioned in Gergen 2000) point at its ongoing character. Play has

a to-and-fro movement. It renews itself in constant repetition (Gadamer 1975: 104). According to Carse, there are *finite* and *infinite games*. Finite games have rules. They are played with an expected outcome in mind: to win and thus to end the game. Examples are mostly competitive sports. In infinite games, playing with the rules and boundaries is part of the game. Infinite games are about surprises, yet knowing that it is only a game. Examples are flirting, theatrical acting, and Bassett's playful way of walking on the city pavements. Ongoing mobile conversations are like infinite play, forever creating new surprises: "next levels".

Another aspect of narrativity that is challenged is the causality of the plot. The plot is like a higher order logic, the 'point' of the narrative. There is no room for events and actions that do not have a function in the larger plot. The unity of narrative life is continuously challenged by new discordant events, which are either made concordant or placed outside the narrative (by forgetting, repressing, or simply declaring them impossible or unimaginable). An interesting element of many mobile phone conversations is the oddity factor. Calls are often made when an unexpected event occurs. "You won't believe what I just saw..." Discordant events and actions are highlighted instead of discarded. We recount events and actions that do not meaningfully fit into a larger narrative whole but are funny, entertaining and somehow worthy in themselves.

Again, play and game seem good metaphors. I often get the feeling, and I am sure many will recognize this, that other peoples' mobile conversations are about nothing. From an outsiders perspective they seem pointless, like any game is ultimately pointless as long as you're not playing. It is only from an insiders perspective that these conversations get their meaning. Such 'pulp fictions' become self-referential, an ironic negation of serious narrating. They are not meant to stand the test of time and fit in the plot. Nor are they meant to be shared outside a small circle of people. Each have their own vernacular and rules, separating *us* from *them*. They share many characteristics with classical gift circles as described by Mauss and Malinowski (and noted by amongst other Taylor & Harper 2002 & 2003; Yoon 2003). Like games, gift exchanges are rule-governed: one has to give, one has to receive, and one has to reciprocate something of equal value. It creates order, as Huizinga says. Gifting strengthens the bonds between individuals and groups by tying them into ongoing reciprocal obligations. At the same time gifting exposes status differences. They are contest games. The one who cannot reciprocate 'loses'. Taylor and Harper describe how for instance returning a text message by a free internet SMS service ("powered by Yahoo") is seen as "cheap" and diminishes the status of the sender (2003: 283). Basically all of Caillois' play characteristics are applicable to gifting, notably the one that says property is exchanged but no goods are produced. I wouldn't agree however with his view that it ends "in a situation identical to that prevailing at the beginning of the game" (Caillois 1959: 10). Mobile gifting is not static but a dynamic equilibrium. It's an infinite game that needs constant care and attention, more so than other kinds of communication.

What does this mean for our identities? We communicate and participate in an increasing number of those circles. The mobile phone is a tool to manage entering and leaving them. Instead of creating one great narrative about ourself and living our life accordingly, we are co-authoring in a bunch of 'micro-narratives' (Hjorth 2005) that are only loosely tied to a whole. We recount and contribute to many different stories. Identities become scattered among many such play circles. Describing what identities are becomes increasingly difficult from an overarching perspective (although that's still what I'm trying to do here with these general remarks...). Single essence makes way for multiple contextual identities. The only way to understand those identities is to be part of them, to step into these circles as well and play along.

#### *sense of time*

Ricoeur makes a distinction between cosmological time (linear progression of time) and phenomenological time, which is our experience of time in terms of phases: past-present-future. The combination of both modalities of time in the narrative is central to our human experience of time. The unpredictability of an incoming phone-call continuously threatens to disrupt the plot. For so many different *micro-narratives* one has to remember the state in

which the conversation was left that it may become increasingly difficult to place events and actions in a chronological order. How does our experience of time change? This is worth a whole paper in itself but one aspect I like to highlight. The mobile phone is for many people a means to 'kill' lost moments. Waiting for the train, being in the train, being too early for an appointment: we almost automatically grab our handphone and start to make a call or compose a text message or, ever more often, listen to music, surf the web, play mobile games, or watch digital television. Temporary time is optimized, used to the max. Lost moments are no longer blank lines in between events and actions that make up a unified narrative. They are now put to good use, for entertainment or for social maintenance. This attitude conjures up visions of life as a game or a contest, getting the most out of it. How many enemies can you slay in 2 minutes? How many laps can you race in 5 minutes? How much can you do in 15 minutes of metro travel? Time becomes playing time.

### **narrative notion of character**

Narrative character consists of the more or less stable properties that make an individual recognizable as the same person (Ricoeur 1992: 119, 121). It is both attributed by oneself and by others. We recognize ourselves as the same person by living according to our developed habits. It is also ascribed through other people's recognition of someone as a consistent person (Ricoeur 1992: 122-128). I already mentioned the importance of the notions *promise* and *commitment*. Many people seem to find commitments burdensome and awkward. Mobile phone users constantly readjust their promises. Commitments are stretched, circumvented, renegotiated, adjusted according to our impulses, flow, or feel of the moment. Because we appreciate this flexibility the mobile offers for ourselves, we also display a remarkable consideration for other peoples' sudden changes of mind. It seems the single stable and dependable narrative character is no longer an adequate description of how people see themselves and others. Again, narrative consistency over time in a solid character makes way for maximizing and optimizing *playing time* in a more circumstantial character. The notion of character becomes redefined as the ability to adapt optimally to the current challenge and to play along with other people's moves. Solidity and coherence were once laudable properties of character. They now make way for flexibility and adaptability. Changing ringtones and colorful fronts once in while to "tell who you are" underlines this idea of a character *du jour*.

Moreover, people are often consulted for the smallest matters. Instead of figuring out things ourselves, as the modernist ideal of the rational autonomous self prescribes, we seem to depend more and more on others to think along, talk us through and help us make decisions. The mobile phone is compared to a "social lifeline" (Fox 2001), "hotline" (Fortunati in Katz & Aakhus 2002) or "umbilical cord" (Townsend 2000: 8). Is the autonomous *unified self* making way for a mobile *distributed self* that only exists in ongoing communicative interplay?

Calling or answering the phone is a step into another temporal plot and spatial setting. It often appears a deliberate break from the physical here and now, a way of relativizing our current state. Is the mobile phone a tool for willingly searching discordance, always keeping as many of our options open as possible? Or is the mobile phone a tool for creating coherence between the many different micro-narratives, for instance through the personalization of the many spaces we move in? These questions remain to be answered.

### **Conclusion: towards a theory of playful identities**

I have tried to show that a number of mobile phone characteristics challenge the narrative metaphor of identity. I proposed that current day identities may be exposed from another side by applying the ludic metaphor. This is not to say narrative identity theory has become useless now that we have the mobile phone. On the contrary perhaps, as more and more filmmakers and writers are inspired to experiment with the mobile phone as a new device for emplotment. Yet a number of narrative elements will have to be rethought. Narrative settings are more singular and fixed, play stresses mobility and the act of moving between settings. Narratives stem from rational deliberation, playful identities are about engagement and participation. Narrative emplotment stresses linearity and causality, while especially the notion of infinite play may be helpful to understand the mobile's use in ongoing conversations,

highlighting of the unexpected, and seemingly disparate multiplicity. Narrative characters ideally are unified and coherent, a theory of playful identities would stress multiplicity, diversions, and unpredictability. Narrative theory departs from the individual person ('character') while playful identities take the interplay between people and their environment as starting point.

Conceptually, play is extremely ambiguous. Play is seen as as effortless but also as difficult and requiring skill. Play is relaxed, involves no strain yet play is competitive and intense. Play is self-absorbing but also self-aware performance. Play is belief but also non-belief, knowing that it is only play. Play is entertaining and fun yet also dead serious. Play has a childish and profane connotation but is also seen as sacred. Play can be seen as only make-belief yet is experienced as very real, authentic action. Play is purposeful in itself, autonomous and needs no players but play is also a highly subjective experience. Play creates order but it is also disruptive.

Many of these contradictions coincide with the complexities in our present-day identities and the everyday choices we face. Just like narrative, play is not only a theoretical concept. It is not only a metaphor for experiencing identity but also a medium for self-understanding. Influenced by new media we may increasingly think of our lives as playful and game-like. Theory and empirical reality become discursive practice: a new way of talking about identities. I believe the most valuable contribution of a theory of playful identities lies in again opening up a view on identities as inherently wrought with paradox, yet fun to think about *and* to work on.

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