

## **From *always-on* to *always-there*: locative media and playful identities**

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### **Summary**

In this paper I look at the Dutch case of Bliin ([www.bliin.com](http://www.bliin.com)) to discuss the convergence of GPS (*global positioning system*), multimedia capabilities, and online publishing software in mobile devices. Bliin enables users to map experiences of places, share these with others via the internet (*geotagging*), and locate people and their preferences (*social proximity*). I explore the implications for experiences of mobility and co-presence. I suggest this convergence creates *playful identities*.

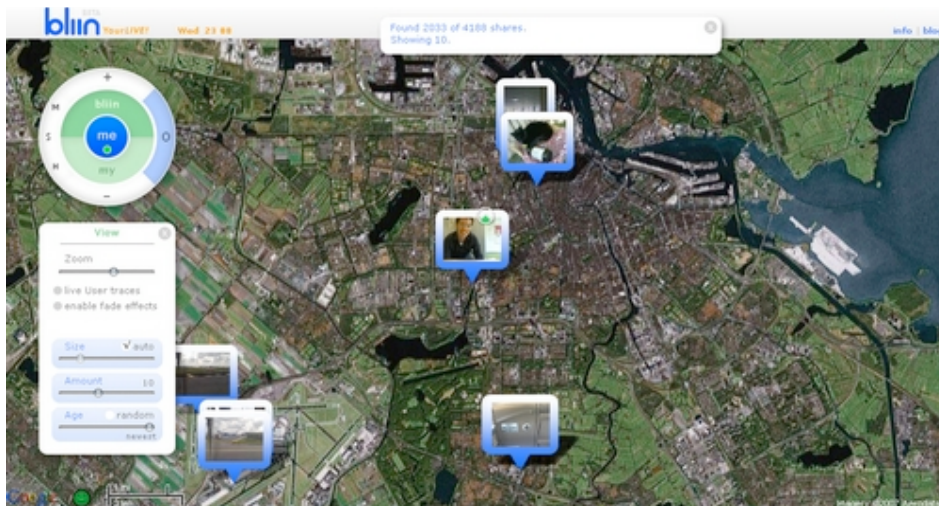
### **Sense of place**

In response to the 'old' new media paradigm of "anyplace, anytime, anywhere" - still prevalent in popular thought - recent work shows that technologies like the mobile phone do indeed contribute to "a sense of place" (Nyíri et al. 2005). People are still aware what situations are appropriate for mobile phone use (Höflich in *ibid*: 160). The mobile helps to create a sense of proximity and intimacy. Familiar people are always 'in the pocket' (Katz & Aakhus 2002; Fox in *MobileLife* report 2006: 13). People talking on the phone, listening to music, or engaging in any kind of "absent presence", create a bubble around them. They take their own 'personalized space' with them while on the move (Gergen 2000; Bassett 2005). The mobile phone is used to schedule and manage mobility, thus sustaining spatial and temporal order (Chung & Lim in Nyíri 2005: 275). Its use as a walkman adds an aural layer which offers an intense experience of one's environment through sound (Bull in *ibid*: 175; Bassett 2005). Migrants call and text with family and friends overseas, maintaining a sense of 'home' (Paragas in *ibid*: 241). The mobile phone even helps to create a sense of 'the global', as devices for worldwide communication through a new common pictorial language (Szécsi in *ibid*: 409).

I want to look at yet another contribution of mobile media to a sense of place, drawing on my user experiences with Dutch 'locative play' Bliin. What happens when multimedia features like cameras, location-based technologies like GPS, always-on internet connection, and software for realtime publishing converge in mobile devices?

### **Bliin: a locative play**

Bliin ([www.bliin.com](http://www.bliin.com)) combines *geotagging* and *proximity*. Registered users install a small Java program on their mobile device. They need a GPS receiver, either integrated into the phone or standalone (e.g. via bluetooth). Their position is sent to the Bliin server in realtime over an always-on data connection. Users can capture photos with their mobile phone camera (in the future also audio, video and text) and attach description and tags. When users publish the photo, GPS coordinates are automatically attached. It appears as a geographically positioned photo on the Bliin web interface, based on Google Maps. Such a *geotag* is called a *share*. The main interface of the Bliin application is a radar that scans for *proximity* of both *shares* and other Bliin users. Via this interface, users can navigate to nearby *shares*. Users can comment on *shares* via the mobile interface and the web. The creator of the *share* will receive an instant indication of a new comment when online. Users decide whether their position, movement, and *shares* are publicly visible, restricted to friends, or private.



web interface at [www.bliin.com](http://www.bliin.com)

Via Bliin, users share their presence, proximity, mobility patterns, and personal experiences of places with others. What happens to the experience of place and mobility, and social co-presence?

### **Experience of place and mobility: augmented and immersive**

Location and movement are *augmented* with additional layers of information and meaning. The personal experience of being and going somewhere fuses with the 'virtual' realm of other peoples' experiences that are shared via Bliin. This may influence our patterns of mobility, conceptualized as meaningful movement (Cresswell 2006: 2-3). Urry (2000 chapter 3) distinguishes four types of travel, which can be applied to mobility practices *in* and *through* Bliin. When I posted a *share* about a roadside Surinam eating place, near Erasmus University Rotterdam, it became an *object that moved* elsewhere. A Dutch user in Japan commented that she felt like eating roti after all those sushi. She was making an *imaginative movement* back to Holland. At the same time she made a *virtual movement* inside the 'game' by going to my *share* and placing a comment. Another Bliin user actually *corporeally moved* to the eating place, tried something, and commented it was indeed good food. Different types of mobility converge in "hybrid space", abrogating the former separation between physical and virtual worlds through "the mix of social practices that occur simultaneously in digital and in physical spaces" (De Souza e Silva 2006: 265).

Being somewhere and moving around in this hybrid space becomes *immersive*. Bliin invites users to take on a participatory attitude, to contribute to the greater whole of Bliin's playworld. A mildly competitive element of spatial conquest is involved. Who is the most mobile user? Who makes the nicest shots? Who is the first to *share* a place? Who can add something interesting about well-trodden places like Amsterdam? Users become part of a game to map and share their sense of place. Over a longer period, users create stories about themselves that make up a social identity within a user group. After a while personal expressions become more general knowledge about someone's style and preferences. Once you start playing Bliin, you have to play on. Trying Bliin out once, adding only one photo, is not meaningful. After all, only a sequence of images creates meaningful 'sentences' (Nyíri 2005: 378). Bliin becomes a platform for *narrative self-publishing*: telling who you are by ongoing contributions.

"So what's new?" one may ask. Have places and mobilities not always been 'augmented' and 'immersive' through shared or contested symbols and stories? New, I believe, is that experiences of place and mobility can be shared (within a restricted circle), broadcasted (for all to see), and 'consumed' (looking at other *shares*) *in realtime*. Books or pictures for instance also enable a breach between spatial experiences and actual physical presence, but lack realtime feedback. Bliin allows places to be continuously co-constructed by people on the move. Places become written by ongoing mobilities and social processes in "hybrid space". These rapid successions create a myriad of dynamic *micro-narratives* (Hjorth 2005: 5). These tend to have diversions, involve

references to other places, and are often more contradictory than former singular narratives of place.

Second, the expression of spatial experiences change. This is partly a continuation of a shift in *form* from textual to more visual representations of experiences, labeled 'visual culture'. It is also a shift in textual and visual *content* and *language*. Earlier representations often tried to depict a singular 'essence' of place. Postcards and the holiday photograph album for instance attempt to offer representative images and stories of travel. They became *genres* that often stress the spectacular, the beautiful, the lasting, and broadly known cultural symbols of places. Bliin users on the other hand appear to highlight the odd, transient, sometimes ugly or even banal side of everyday experiences. Bliin's textualities (names, tags, descriptions, comments, nicknames) and visuals (photos, avatars, mobile and web interface) do not create coherent 'grand stories' about places that are meant to last. Rather, these stories are fragmented, fleeting, and self-referential: only meaningful within the closed circle of Bliin. *Shares* often refer to other *shares*. Many people have photographed their own laptop screen displaying one of their *shares* in a browser. They turn their mediated experience - "I *shared* this place" - into a new expression. It is also shown by the practice of what on e.g. Youtube is called a 'tribute': playfully commenting on an earlier *share* by somebody else. For instance, I felt an instant urge to comment on a nearby *share* someone made of an oldtimer BMW with the description "nice car", by taking a similar angle shot of a very ordinary car. Totally senseless outside Bliin. Only meaningful within the game.

Thirdly, Bliin users express spatial experiences in highly personal - even idiosyncratic - ways. Postcards and the photo album portray generally known properties of places (In Egypt we visited the pyramids...) and subsequently involve personalization by writing something on the back or by brief subscriptions (... and poor uncle Joe fell off a camel!). Bliin seems to create an inverse movement by making unique inner experiences (This is what I am seeing now) available to the outer world via *shares* (and you may look too!).

### **Experience of co-presence: pervasive**

Always-on technologies contribute to altered experiences of *co-presence* from physical to imagined nearness (Urry 2002). What happens when technologies start mediating physical proximity? *Always-there* technologies, as they may be dubbed, help to pinpoint others and trace their movements and experiences in (almost) realtime. Co-presence becomes more *pervasive*, emerging not only when potentiality turns into actual communication, but as ongoing actuality. Game researcher Rhody points out that games create new points-of-view, since the avatar can be seen from different camera perspectives (Rhody 2005). Bliin *shares* offer a game-like over-the-shoulder perspective. Not only one's own seeing becomes visible, but also the seeing of others. Coupled with the realtime aspect, a *pervasive* sense of co-presence arises through sharing perspectives: "I see what you see now". Further, Bliin exposes and visualizes traces of other users' past presence, like 'virtual graffiti'. Users are also aware that others participate in the same playworld. There is even the possibility of physically bumping into another nearby Bliin user. "Technologies of absent presence" create a temporal sense of co-presence, because the other is always available (Gergen in Katz & Aakhus 2002: 237). Locative technologies enable a spatial sense of co-presence, because the other is always there. As *always on* and *always there* converge, a doubled kind of 'present presence' arises.

### **Playful identities**

Bliin is a navigation device for organizing experiences of place, movement, and social proximity. Being and going somewhere, and nearness to others are central to our sense of identity. Through identities, people relate to themselves, others and the world around them. According to Ricoeur, narratives are the "privileged form of mediation" for the "interpretation of the self" (Ricoeur 1992: 114 fn1). Events and actions that make up a person's life occur in a *setting*. Settings themselves are narrative, 'scripted' with stories about how to behave in them, what social roles to adopt.

According to Meyrowitz, the advent of electronic mass media weakened the ties between social identities and places (Meyrowitz in Nyíri 2003: 94). As suggested above, the element of *augmentation* in Bliin stimulates further breakdown of singular meaningful stories associated with place. Tying Urry's different mobilities, De Souza e Silva's "hybrid space", and Meyrowitz' barrier breakdown together, I suggest narrative settings are increasingly defined and articulated

by various mobilities in hybrid space. But in order to tell meaningful narratives about ourselves, and understand those of others, we still have to locate actions and events as taking place somewhere...

Game and play are useful metaphors to understand the mobile character of narrative settings. Caillois makes a distinction between *paidia* (spontaneous, impulsive, joyous, uncontrolled fantasy) and *ludus* (absorbing, rule-governed, for its own sake and amusement, involving skill and mastery). He sees them as two poles of a continuum (2001: 10; 27-35). This coincides with *play* and *game*. Moving *inside* virtual worlds like Bliin, with its own rules and definitions, has a structured game-like aspect. As we become *immersed* in Bliin, we construct, express and share our identities via the practice of 'self-publishing'. The game itself becomes a narrative setting. Due to their *pervasiveness*, the various games we are involved in become meaningful for our life as a whole. Moving *between* such worlds involves more freedom in defining and articulating what are meaningful settings for one's narrative identity. This can be called play.

The metaphor of the *game* can be applied to the construction of identities within virtual environments such as Bliin. The metaphor of *play* can be used to understand how games continue to shape our identities even outside of these games. This is not to say however that games are completely structured or real life completely free. I have tried to show how the convergence of virtual and real worlds create *hybrid worlds* that blur crude distinctions between *game* and *play*. It is an analytical starting point for ongoing research about the role of "the play-element in culture" (Huizinga 1955).

### **Failing technologies**

Considering the idea(l) of convergence, what happens when technologies fail? Bliin's GPS positioning may not work due to environment (being inside, between high buildings, clouded sky). Mobile internet may not be available or expensive (in a foreign country). The application sometimes crashes. On simpler devices (non smart phones) it excludes running other applications in parallel. Batteries go dead. The user is then thrown into the 'former' mode of spatial experience. This is not simply a movement back to normal, but itself a reflective kind of mobility. The sudden sense of deprivation induces increased reflectivity about the technology-mediated ways we experience places, mobility and co-presence. Failure was in fact a great aid in writing this paper!

### **Final thought**

When I tried out Bliin, I wondered whether it takes away some of the spontaneity and exploratory character in relating to place and other people? It may seem so. Bliin's location-based multimedia, tags, descriptions and comments pre-inscribe hitherto unknown places with other peoples' experiences. Bliin constantly makes us aware that almost every place is suffused with human experiences and stories. This collective sedimented *Erfahrung* may leave less room for a uniquely individual instant *Erlebnis*, to borrow Walter Benjamin's distinction. On second thought I became less sure. Other Bliin users offer surprising new perspectives of places, breaking open places thought to be known. Further, Bliin induces spontaneity by stimulating users to divert from fixed paths, routes and plans. As the Surinam food stall example shows, users let their mobility be guided by Bliin. Users unexpectedly stumble upon someone's *share* or somebody in the vicinity. De Sousa e Silva says of a similar locative game: "It is as if the game creates an imaginary playful layer that merges with the city space, connecting people who previously did not know one another via mobile technologies according to their movement in physical spaces." (De Souza e Silva 2006: 272). Moreover, an exciting sense of newness is reinforced by the 'double articulation' of locative media. Both its actual use, and an emergent discourse about the potential of location-based services, turn ordinary spatial experiences into extraordinary ones. Finally, as mentioned, Bliin adds a playful element of conquest. Playing Bliin is fun. Earth can be mapped all over again. Not geographically but in a 'geosophical' way, as J. K. Wright proposed (1947). According to Wright's original idea, earth consists of multiple *terrae incognitae*. Again, they are filled in and opened up by never-ending mobilities, and ongoing developments in mediated experience and expressions.

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