

Proposal Mobile Media 2007 - <http://www.mobilemedia2007.net>

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Playful identities and the mobile phone

What is the influence of the mobile phone on identity? Philosophers (Ricoeur 1992; Taylor 1989) and social scientists (Geertz 1975; Giddens 1991) have described personal and cultural identities as narrative identities. We experience, express and reflexively understand ourselves by bringing discordant events into the unified plot of a narrative. Past, present and future are interlinked by telling stories about one's own life, about others and about the world. But does the narrative, with its roots in oral and written culture, fit our contemporary digital culture? Media-specific properties of the mobile phone challenge many aspects of narrative identities and promote 'playful identities'.

The mobile phone challenges the logical unity of the *narrative setting* since it allows us to act in multiple parallel contexts. Diversions and contradictions in our stories may surface as we switch back and forth between contexts (Geser 2004). Such rapid alterations of contexts resemble the playful performance switches between front-and backstage (Goffman 1959).

The mobile phone challenges the functional role of events in the *narrative plot*. Users often engage in seemingly trivial communicative exchanges with others. Unexpected events are highlighted and remembered. They are logged in phone memory and shared with others. Such reciprocal gifting may be called a kind of micro-narrativity (Hjorth 2005) but also has playful properties in its to-and-fro movement (Gadamer 1975), cooperative or competitive nature (Taylor & Harper 2002) and ironic negation of narrating as rational, reflexive and thoughtful.

The mobile phone challenges *narrative notions of character* like the promise (Ricoeur 1992) or commitment (Taylor 1989) which express the individual's intention to be a consistent person. Mobile phone users constantly readjust their promises. Others are consulted about the smallest matters. The mobile phone becomes a social lifeline (Fox 2001) or hotline (Fortunati in Katz & Aakhus 2002). Is the consistent *Unified Self* making way for a *Distributed Self* that only exists in communicative interplay?