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Video Games That Make You Run, Talk Face-to-Face, and Explore the Environment

Published on June 15, 2009 by Mike Lanza

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I caught a glimpse of the future of mobile phone games this past weekend at the Come Out and Play Festival in New York City last weekend, and I'm *very* excited.

I played six "location aware mobile games" that made me run and walk like crazy, talk to dozens of people, and explore nooks and crannies of New York that I never would have seen otherwise. In other words, playing these games made me more physically fit, more social (face-to-face), and far more aware of the physical environment that surrounded me.

This is the polar opposite of the effects of today's video games on children, who play for hours inside their houses without moving anything but their fingers, barely talking to anyone.

Two fundamental characteristics of these games that I played at Come Out and Play account for these different impacts on the players. They are 1) mobility and 2) "location awareness". I'll describe these two

characteristics below.

Mobillty

Our mobile phones were our game controllers. So, our screens were very small. Meanwhile, our physical surroundings were very rich. So, our "game board" was our physical surroundings, not the phone screens. Furthermore, because our mobile phones were so small, we were able to move a great deal, so that our game board could change as fast as our feet could take us.

Take the game Paparazzi. Each team of three was either a celebrity entourage or a pack of paparazzi – i.e. celebrity photographers. The object of paparazzi teams was to take a photo of the celebrity on the celebrity team, and the object of celebrity teams was to keep this from happening. The mobile phones were very important in this game because they gave us information on locations of the different teams and of the "party spots" – i.e. safe havens for celebrities where they could not be photographed.

However, we would take these clues from our mobile phones and devote most of our attention to navigating the streets and buildings of midtown Manhattan, and then to the members of rival teams when we would see them. Yes, we had dramatic chase scenes among the huge crowds of Times Square. We didn't watch it on a video display – we lived it!

Location Awareness

The single most important new technology in mobile phones that makes these location aware mobile games possible is GPS, or "Global Positioning Satellite" technology. With a GPS chip inside, a mobile phone game can "know" where it is on the earth at any instant.
The game can then do two vital things with this location information: show the player where he or she is (e.g. on a map), and send that player's location to a server so others can see where he or she is. The server can then pull together all other players' locations in a game and send that to all players' maps, so that every player knows where all other players are.

Thus, using GPS, mobile phone users who are physically close to each other can share an experience that mobile phone users without GPS cannot. Does it annoy you when you see a group of teenagers, each sitting with their mobile phones in separate worlds texting to who-knows-where? Well, at Come Out and Play, we were running around in a coordinated urban ballet, yelling at each other and laughing.

Take the iPhone game Seek n' Spell. We players – say three to six to a game – were all looking at the same map on our phones. On the map were all our locations plus virtual letters. The goal of each player was to reach a letter before the other players, so we could pluck it down to our phone. A letter might be on a street corner or in the middle of a fountain, so we couldn't just stare at our phones while we ran around plucking down letters – we had to navigate physical obstructions and avoid hitting other players.

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Once we got enough letters, we could spell words and get points.

The Internet is often revered for its location independence – i.e. the fact that its users can interact in exactly the same way regardless of where they are. There are significant advantages to this feature, but one significant downside is that it de-emphasizes face-to-face interactions.

Location awareness makes physical location and face-to-face interactions important again. In fact, it can add fascinating complexity to our real-world experience, beyond what we can experience without any technology. In playing a couple games of Seek n' Spell at Pier 84 in New York with a half dozen people, I learned far more about the place and the people than I would have if I had just wandered there on a stroll.

So, we adults had a fantastic weekend playing location aware mobile games in New York City. How can we improve our kids' everyday lives with these games wherever they live? I'll take that subject up in another article in the near future.

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One Response to *Video Games That Make You Run, Talk Face-to-Face, and Explore the Environment*

David *says:*
June 16, 2009 at 11:01 am

Hi Mike,

Glad you enjoyed our game (Paparazzi)!

Your two points capture COAP-style games pretty well, though I think I'd add a third element to the list — the re-contextualization of everyday objects as game elements. Even if you're intimately familiar with an environment, these games can get you to view it in a completely different way, perhaps rejuvenating your appreciation of it.

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