

# Moving Story

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## ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the nascent field of socially-relevant, location-based storytelling on mobile devices. For the past six years, I have been working in the mobile media industry, developing location-based projects delivered over mobile devices for the museum, travel, and film industries. In this paper, I provide strategic considerations for assembling effective, issues-based mobile productions. I will focus on the platform-independent aspects of actors, in situ action, story arc, and social impact. This study is based on personal experiences, producer interviews, and user studies of four different socially-relevant mobile productions: Rimini Protokoll's *Call Cutta in a Box*, Untravel Media's *The Greatest Neighborhood this Side of Heaven*, PETlab's *Re:Activism*, and Soundwalk and the Kitchen Sisters' *The Ground Zero Sonic Memorial*.

## Keywords

Terrative, mobile media, mobile technology, walking tour, mixed-reality, augmented reality, alternate reality game, ARG, mobile storytelling, mobile active, and social impact.

## INTRODUCTION: THE AGE OF TERRATIVES

The concept of telling stories via phones can be traced to various historical antecedents: Podcasting (coined in 2003,) Alternate Reality Games (*Majestic* first appeared in 2001,) museum audio guides (on bulky tape in 1950's,) and even a series of phone handsets known as Theatrophone to transmit opera and theater performances to remote audiences via telephone wire (from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, see image below.)



**Figure 1. The Theatrophone**

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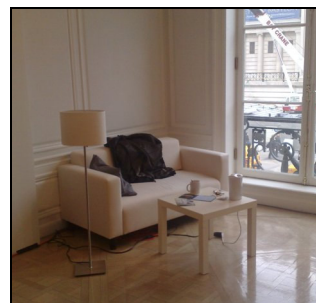
These experiences varied widely in context and in technology, but as cell phones with multimedia playback and location-sensing technologies (GPS) become more ubiquitous (Kanellos, 2006, Karp, 2006) storytelling in public places delivered via mobile devices is emerging as a genre of its own (O'Shea, 2005). This article attempts to illuminate various production strategies for on-site mobile media. For the purpose of this paper we will call these stories "Terratives" or terrestrial narratives, that is, stories told on mobile devices in tandem with real places and people.

## SUMMARY OF PRODUCTIONS

Below are summaries of the four Terratives that form the basis of this analysis. You will notice a wide range of storytelling techniques, including live telephony with semi-scripted characters, face-to-face interactions, streaming video, text-message-driven games, and mapped, Flash Lite content. Yet all of these projects have similar goals of illuminating audiences about specific social issues in very specific geographies.

### Call Cutta in a Box

German theater group Rimini Protokoll first experimented with call-center-driven storytelling in 2005 with an avant-garde scavenger hunt through Berlin guided by a scripted operator in Calcutta. In 2009 the group brought a version of this performance art piece to the Goethe Institute in New York. Individuals could sign up for a 45-minute experience, that began by entering a large, empty room and a telephone begins ringing (see Figure 2.)



**Figure 2. Call Cutta in a Box setting at the Goethe Institute. A phone and a remotely controlled tea kettle sit on the table**

Alone in the room, you pick up the handset and begin a 45-minute conversation with a call center employee in India. The employee has a script of various questions and conversation ensues around subjects of work, God, dreams, and personal stories. Throughout the conversation the call center employee is remotely activating electronic devices in the room that reveal components of his or her own story: a hot water pot for tea, a curtain to reveal a video camera, and a key to open a drawer containing a Hindu shrine. The conversation is

both programmed and highly personal, obliquely alluding to the impersonal and imbalanced nature of the global village we currently occupy.

### **The Greatest Neighborhood This Side of Heaven**

A title that comes from ex-residents' name for Boston's West End, this walkable documentary film tells the story of how a particular immigrant neighborhood was leveled in the 1950's to make room for luxury high rise apartments. This story's walking route moves from the Boston Redevelopment Authority office in city hall to a historic neighborhood similar in stature to that which was removed, and finally on to the West End, the neighborhood whose structures were almost entirely erased through urban renewal. The story was produced by the granddaughter of a West End resident and features the voices of BRA officials, architects, former West End inhabitants, and land use policy activists. As you walk with this story the injustices that led to the removal of the West Enders are explained and physical details in the new West End point out how the concept of high-rise urban suburbs where "if you lived here you'd be home now" failed. The story facilitates live conversation with former West End residents in the West End museum and planners in the Boston Redevelopment Authority.

### **Re:Activism**

This game was developed by the Parsons New School for Design's PETlab, directed by Colleen Macklin. Like many text message scavenger hunts, *Re:Activism* pits teams of game players against each other and the clock to collect a series of clues and perform various challenges throughout Manhattan in a three-hour time window. This particular hunt focuses on "the history of riots, protests, and activism in New York City." (comoutandplay.org) Each team was given a smartphone to get messages with game play instructions, to communicate with game monitors at headquarters, and as a means of photographing challenges completed. Points are accumulated and team scores are announced via text message as the game plays out. The game focuses on sites of protest for issues such as gay rights, voting rights, and responsible urban policy. Challenges involve interaction with strangers to create video reenactments of protests, sign petitions, and provide historical information.

### **The Ground Zero Sonic Memorial**

This audio-only walking tour of the World Trade Center in Manhattan tells a personal and broad story of the 9/11 disaster. Comprised of ambient sound, memories recorded on a National Public Radio call in line, interviews with experts, and an emotional soundtrack, the overall feeling is of a musical audio-book playing out

over disaster site. The tour is produced by Soundwalk, a company that specializes in narrative, audio-based walking tours with famous actors and citizens around the world.

## **PRODUCTION ANALYSIS**

### **Actors and Active Audiences**

These four Terratives illuminate several approaches to character development. They all feature some sort of guide character that familiarizes audiences with the unconventional format for the story and leads them on this moveable journey. Untravel and Soundwalk use a scripted, pre-recorded narrator. This approach facilitates work with actors and celebrities to deliver a component of the content. A good narrator frames the story, adds to the emotional stakes, and forges a conspiratorial bond with the audience. This approach can, at times, distance the narrator as audiences feel their presence less and, in certain cases, an actor may not really be connected to the issue at stake.

In contrast, Rimini Protokoll's approach to use a live guide in a call center in India makes the relationship between the audience and narrator extremely real and the crux of the narrative. The narrator's script in all its obviousness is operating on both a practical and a meta level in the performance. One participant reported feeling an immediate closeness to the call center employee because of the personal nature of the questions asked: such as "Do you believe in God?" and "What is your dream in life?" The contrast of such deep questions delivered from a chatter-filled call center in India where alarms sound for each sale made by fellow employees punctuates the meditation on "closeness" that the piece is getting at. Still, there is some distance felt when a tired Indian citizen with two jobs is speaking to you at midnight and obviously not getting as much novelty or satisfaction out of the experience as you are.

PETlab also chose to go with a manned HQ to respond to game play questions and dole out clues during the play of *Re:Activism*. In playing a game in unfamiliar territory with unfamiliar technology, it was helpful to have a direct line to the stories' creators. However, the guides tried their best to keep distance from game play, and by no means were meant to be characters in the narrative.

Overall, the development of guide voices, whether live or pre-recorded, is bound to evolve immensely as Terratives mature. Similar to the Greek chorus, whose outside, interpretive voice became unnecessary as audiences were became more comfortable with implied meanings in theater, so too might location-based narratives lose some of the instructional imperatives encoded into its guide characters.

Other characters in these productions include those encountered by chance, the audience themselves, and pre-recorded interviews. Again Soundwalk and Untravel are similar in crafting their stories around pre-recorded interviews with those affected by the tragedies being told. *Sonic Memorial* becomes especially effective as we hear actual calls from doomed airplanes and upper floor offices minutes before the collapse. Similarly, Untravel's use of recordings from interviews with insensitive land developers in the 1950's opens the nut of class conflict at the heart of the story. In contrast, Untravel's journey includes the unique opportunity to meet the storytellers from the West End in person on a stop at the West End museum on the tour. Such face-to-face encounters with ex-residents were reported by many audience members to be the highlight of the walk, as the feelings, insights, and even humor of the tragedy come to life.

In Rimini Protokoll's and PETlab's work, the audience is probably the most prominent character in the story. You are pouring yourself tea, interviewing gay patrons of a historic bar, asking strangers for urban history information, and revealing some of your innermost secrets to a hired operator half a world away. This concept of audience performance within an issues-based story is a powerful one. If the end goal of a story is get audience members more aware of and involved in a specific issue, presenting the message in an active (scavenger hunt, human landmarks, teamwork) rather than passive (television, film, radio) media form may lead to much more engaged and affected audiences. Untravel is currently conducting studies of Terratives as inspiring social action with the New England Aquarium. Results will be released in late 2009.

### In Situ Action

As mentioned above, Terratives are a unique storytelling format in that they allow audiences to perform and get physically involved in story playback. But beyond conversations and competition with others, what other types of actions can mobile media inspire in audiences?

While I believe myriad forms of activism can arise from Terratives, in my study of these specific productions, three types came to the forefront: thoughtful meditation, canvassing, and commerce. The first concept is an often overlooked aspect of what mobile media is massively good at. Currently many people listen to music in public spaces on mobile devices, and even such non-locative media can get us to pensively examine our surroundings and meditate on specific aspects of the visual environment. The *Sonic Memorial* led me and my partner to a quiet, impromptu shrine for the fallen next to a firehouse on the path. More than just guiding us there, the mobile story put us in the mindset of stopping, and contemplating all the visual memories around us.

Slowing our minds, honing our eyesight, and alerting us to the spectacle around us is a key feature of mobile multimedia, especially taking into account how headphones inevitable detach us, to a degree, from our surroundings.

Many social issues are communicated and solved through canvassing. Of course, political candidates rely heavily on this techniques and many social service agencies rely on canvassing to spread the word on issues. *Re:Activism* incorporated canvassing actions into its segment on women's suffrage. Participants needed to find strangers in Washington Square Park, educate them on the original case brought before the Supreme Court advocating women's right to vote, and get signatures on the issue. While the ticking clock and competitive aspects of the game made this particular segment forced and discouraged thoughtful canvassing on the issues, it does seem that some sort of reward system for canvassing might be built into issues-based Terratives. Similarly, the availability of telephony features throughout the narrative, facilitate voter messaging to political representatives on issues they care about.

Finally, mobile media can drive types of commerce and donations to causes. The fact that audiences create foot traffic in lesser known and disadvantaged neighborhoods can be huge boost for economic and cultural development. One audience member recalls the loneliness she felt dissipate when she visited with the ex-Westenders in *Greatest Neighborhood*. Furthermore, companies such as The Extraordinaries ([www.theextraordinaries.org](http://www.theextraordinaries.org)) and mGive ([www.mgive.com](http://www.mgive.com)) take advantage of mobile phone ubiquity to encourage time and financial contributions to non-profit organizations.

### Story Arc

All of the Terratives discussed here had story arcs of sorts, each with particular strategies and signs of more development needed. Soundwalk's strategy was to start *Sonic Memorial* with hour-by-hour live archival footage from 9/11. We hear from a journalist who recorded street sounds from when the first plane struck. We then hear a call from an airphone on the Boston flight. We finally hear accounts of horror when loved ones didn't return home. It's an effective strategy but only lasts through the first half hour and the following 60 minutes are short memories of various aspects of the tragedy and the buildings' life span. Tension dies off and *Sonic Memorial* becomes more like a museum guide. Maintaining the storytelling tension would have required a higher level of detail into the events of 9/11 or finding some other storyline or character that slowly reveals itself over the 90 minute walk.

*Call Cutta* has similar aspirations of a story arc, but a much looser one based on the idea that the call center employee and audience slowly reveal more and more personal information about each other, culminating in the revelation of a video camera whereby you and your new friend can finally see each other. However, I could tell that my call center buddy had been through this with so many people that he didn't seem really affected by what he showed me or was shown. In the end, the feel good concept of connection really ended up, as one participant said, "a novelty, with little sincerity."

*The Greatest Neighborhood* moves historically from early 19<sup>th</sup> land creation practices in Boston, to the economic issues leading to Urban Renewal champions in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, to the vivisection on the city in the 1950's to the reform in urban design process to make it more collective. One common challenge in developing location-based narratives lies in finding pathways that cooperate with a carefully told story. The West End narrative culminates when audiences reach the West End Museum, but from there we have an awkward 15 minute epilogue about modern efforts towards participatory neighborhood design. This section's geography has only a tangential attachment to the content, and in the end, the audience reported feeling more tired than inspired to action.

*Re:Activism*, as with many games, is non-linear, so you can start and end in any point. Within each challenge is a bit of backstory about the issue, but written more as an information card than a juicy piece of a larger story. One of the reported disappointments in this and other scavenger hunt games is a lack of engaging text and keen incorporation of one's surroundings. Rather the sites are backdrops and the text is pure exposition.

Thus there are many ways to approach story arc in Terrative development, but having some sense of what is to be revealed, both within particular spaces (scenes if you will) and overall through the story (its path) is key to maintaining audience interest.

### Social Impact

As a summary of the Terratives examined, we might look ahead to a world in which significant audiences are accustomed to getting location-based narratives on their phones. What will this mean for how people understand and get involved with social issues?

For one thing, I believe that many documentary films, especially those focusing on social issues, will generate Terrative-like derivatives designed to bring audiences closer to the issues and locales featured in the film.

In general, more media will be developed using public places as stages for dramas and platforms for involving visitors in local issues. In our backyards and in the places

we visit, social issues will not be confined to fleeting glimpses from moving vehicles or the city desk in the local paper, but will become readily accessible as a narrative overlay on the maps we constantly consult for driving, dining, and orientation.

Overall, it is my hope that we will see a rise in interest in and connection to social issues on a neighborhood, regional, and global level. Location-aware phones may be an important tool in allowing us to peer deeply into the social fabric of our surroundings wherever we go, and encourage us to help out, no matter what our situation.

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Untravel Media's *The Greatest Neighborhood This Side of Heaven*:

[http://www.untravelmedia.com/tours/1/the\\_greatest\\_neighborhood\\_this\\_side\\_of\\_heaven/](http://www.untravelmedia.com/tours/1/the_greatest_neighborhood_this_side_of_heaven/)

Soundwalk and the Kitchen Sister's *The Ground Zero Sonic Memorial*:

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PETlab's *Re:Activism*

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