Narratives of Ambient Play: Camera Phone Practices in Urban Cartographies

Larissa Hjorth

Abstract This chapter explores the unofficial role of camera phone practices in visualising everyday forms of ambient play. I argue that camera phone practices—especially in an age of geo-tagging—are creating their own cartographies of place that overlay the visual with the ambient, social with the geographic, and emotional with the electronic. In other words, camera phone practices evoke the ongoing importance of ambient play and co-presence in mapping a sense of place. Having outlined the notion of performative cartography as part of what has been defined as 'critical cartography', I consider how camera phone practices can be understood through ambient, co-present play. I turn to a site-specific mobile game that deploys Instagram to explore the ways in which cartography can be performed and how that performativity creates new ways for engaging with an everyday place. The game, *keitai mizu* [mobile water]), was made for a Tokyo post-3/11 tsunami and Fukushima disaster context. *Keitai mizu* renders players into investigators by using the camera phone and Twitter as part of the discovery process in uncovering the natural water streams under the urban cartographies.

Keywords Urban cartographies · Mobile phones · Mobile phone cameras · Photography · Ambient play · Mobile games

Within urban spaces, the taking, reflecting and sharing of camera phones are redefining the overlay between spatial, temporal, social and cultural narratives. As mobile phone apps such as Instagram emplace and overlay the electronic with the geographic and the social with the location, they are reshaping the potential

L. Hjorth (✉)
School of Media and Communication, RMIT University, GPO Box 2476,
Melbourne VIC 3001, Australia
e-mail: larissa.hjorth@rmit.edu.au

cartographies of the urban (Gordon and de Souza e Silva 2011; Farman 2011; Perkins 2009; Wilmott 2013). Through user-created content (UCC) and locative maps, mobile media are creating new forms of spatial mapping (Farman 2011). This feature has not been lost on many new media artist collectives such as Blast Theory or artists such as Drew Hemmet, who argue for the importance in investigating the relationship between space and cartography (Farman 2011). Artists such as Christian Nold (2009) and theorists such as Nanna Verhoeff (2013) have been key in thinking about cartography as performative. This performative dimension is no more apparent than in the case of camera phone practices in urban spaces. They meditate and re-present. They reframe. They play a powerful role in the experience, representation and performance of the urban.

And yet, few studies on camera phones have connected the potential citizenship and vernacular agency around apps such as Instagram. There is a disconnect between the studies around identity work (Wendt 2014; Walker Rettber 2014), creative practice/art practice (Rieser 2011; Zylinska 2015; Palmer 2014) and its role in reconfiguring how we experience and represent place (Farman 2011) and citizenship. Mobile media play a key role in emergent intimate publics whereby binaries such as online/offline, public/private and work/personal are eschewed. This entanglement can be understood through the notion of ambient play.

By framing mobile art and game interventions in terms of ambient play, this chapter seeks to curate some of the undulating entanglements of mobile media within everyday life. I argue that camera phone practices—especially in an age of geo-tagging where images are encoded with geographic information—are creating their own cartographies of place within the urban as they overlay the visual with the ambient, social with the geographic and emotional with the electronic. In other words, camera phone practices evoke the ongoing importance of ambient play and co-presence in mapping a sense of place. In this chapter, I discuss a site-specific mobile game that deploys Instagram to explore the ways in which cartography can be performed and how that performativity creates new ways for engaging with an everyday place. The game, *keitai mizu* [mobile water], was made for a Tokyo post-3/11 (post-tsunami and Fukushima disaster) context.

The game takes place in an urban park in the busy location of Shibuya. Underneath the park is a series of hidden streams. The aim of *keitai mizu* was to make pedestrians aware of these streams and to reflect differently upon the park space. In order to do so, we hid a series of Japanese and Australian artworks of water creatures around the park. Players had 10 min to search the park and uncover, photograph and share (via Instagram or Twitter) the artwork. However, some of the artworks looked like rubbish to further confuse the relationship between art and the quotidian, game and non-game, and water and non-water spaces. *Keitai mizu* renders players into investigators by using the camera phone and Twitter as part of the discovery process in uncovering the natural water streams under the urban cartographies.

In order to explore the role of camera phones in the re-narrating and intervening of urban spaces, this chapter firstly outlines changing definitions of ambient play and cartography in the light of mobile media and camera phone apps. Then, I

turn to the case study of *keitai mizu* to consider how the use of camera phones as part of gameplay can provide new ways to co-presently intervene and represent urban spaces.

1 Locating Ambient Play

Camera phone practices have become an integral part of everyday life. Camera phone apps such as Instagram, while often playing an unofficial role in everyday practices, have seemingly colonised every experience. No experience is too banal or quotidian to photograph and share; rather, as Ilpo Koskinen has argued, camera phone practices are ordered by the logic of the banal and mundane (2007). In their everydayness, they reflect and amplify the rhythm and movements across places, spaces and temporalities. Camera phone practice shapes, and is shaped by, different modes for conceptualising place.

As they move in and out of the background and foreground in urban spaces, camera phone practices contribute to what can be called ambient play. Ambience is often used to describe the effects of sound and music; or in human–computer interaction (HCI), it has played a key role in the understanding of ubiquitous computing (Dourish 2005); as a noun, it specifically refers to a style of music with electronic textures and no consistent beat that is used to create a mood or feeling, but more generally, the term alludes to the diffuse atmosphere of a place. In short, ambience is about the sensorial and affective *texture* of a place. There are many features of gameplay that are ambient—most explicitly the soundtracks that play a pivotal role in developing the mood, genre and emotional clues for the player. Without their soundscapes, many games would fail, and yet, like ambience, the importance of sound is also relatively overlooked in games studies despite its pivotal role in player embodiment.

However, what constitutes ambience within the context of mobile gameplay—especially as it moves across different modes of mediated and co-located presence, and thus different experiences of emplacement—means we need to develop a more robust understanding of ambience (Hjorth and Richardson 2014). In mobile games, the audiovisual ambience is augmented by the haptic, social, networked and locative elements of the game experience. As we have argued in other work, interpreting mobile gaming as ambient play 'contextualizes the game within broader processes of sociality and embodied media practices', and defines play as something that takes place both in and out of games, reflecting broader cultural nuances and phenomena (Hjorth and Richardson 2014: 60). So ambience is not just an aural experience, but also conveys the way games infiltrate our social and emotional lives, afford particular sense perceptions and impact upon our movement through domestic and urban spaces. All of these elements work to diversify our experience of co-presence, of being with others; indeed, co-presence in its various forms and combinations is an important part of the ambient texture of gameplay and is what makes online games so compelling.

While the cultural dimensions of play have been discussed in detail by Sutton-Smith (1997) and in the context of games by Zimmerman and Salen (2004) who draw upon Huizinga (1955) and (Caillois and Barash 2001), the playful within spaces like the urban have a long history that can be linked to historical motifs like the *flâneur* and the 1960s movement *Situational International* (de Souza e Silva and Hjorth 2009). In keeping with these historical and sociocultural dimensions of play, in this chapter I argue that camera phone practice expands upon these earlier phenomenon where representing place involves various forms of co-presence (Farman 2011). As Miguel Sicart argues in *Play Matters* (2014), play is increasingly becoming recognised as an integral part of all facets of life and no longer relegated to compartmentalised areas. Play is integral to being human and has multiple cultural, social, historical and emotional entanglements.

Ambient play suggests a need for nuanced and dynamic readings of mobile media as it moves in and through place. As Paul Dourish argues, 'ambience draws our attention to distractions between focus and periphery… and different ways in which information can be incorporated into an environment' (2005: 25). Drawing upon the work of Brown and Duguid (1994), Dourish argues for an embodied phenomenological approach. Elsewhere, he encourages us to understand information, ambience and intelligence as cultural categories that are contested and re-imagined (Dourish et al. 2005). Ambience, along with interaction, has become key cornerstones in HCI and especially ubiquitous computing and yet must remember that they are culturally specific and informed. For Kjeldskov et al. (2013), the term 'digital urban ambience' is a more nuanced lens for understanding the role of mobile devices mediating urban contexts.

Ambient play brings together the growing importance of accounting for ambience in a Dourish definition as a movement between the focus and periphery (2005) and play as central to urban cartographies. The rising significance of play within everyday quotidian life can be paralleled to shifts in definitions of cartography in what has been called the 'critical cartography' turn. For Chris Perkins (2012), the shift in maps towards the performative (Verhoeff 2012) can be understood as part of a broader ludic shift whereby playing no longer happens *on* maps but *in* maps. Drawing on Raessen's (2006) discussion of the ludification of culture whereby play increasingly performs a key role in everyday life, Perkins argues that cartography has learnt from location-based mobile gaming and the ways in which playful collaboration can lead to new ways of seeing places. As Perkins notes, applications such as desktop mapping and GIS have democratised the tools for cartography and in turn made mapping 'no longer tied to fixed specifications' (2012: 2).

Perkins' work is especially important in the context of bringing together the work around play and critical cartography. Camera phone apps expand upon this earlier wave of democratised cartographic tools in ways which are more playful and ambient. And yet, much of the contextualisation of camera phone practices is linked to debates around the remediation of visual culture and the haunting of the analogue within the digital. For Perkins, the ludic or playful turn in culture limits the historical significance of play within many facets of everyday life. As Perkin argues, 'people have always *played*, and perhaps increasingly *play* with

mapping, instead of simply making or using a map for an instrumental task' (2012: 3). Elsewhere, Perkins has argued how the rise of vernacular mapping in tandem with cross-disciplinary approaches (i.e. ethno-methodology, actor–network theory, non-representational theory and phenomenology) provides new ways for rethinking mapping where the playful is intrinsically interwoven within its logic (Perkins 2009; Dodge et al. 2009).

Second-generation camera phone practices—as a practice embedded within the movements of the everyday through geo-tagging—is indicative of the creative and performative aspects of cartography (Verhoeff 2013). In particular, they highlight the shift of camera phone practices from representing first-generation 'networked visuality' (Ito and Okabe 2005; Mørk Petersen 2009; Burgess 2007) to what myself and Sarah Pink have called 'emplaced visuality' (2012). With locative media in the form of geo-tagging creating different overlays between cartographies of the geographic, social, electronic and temporal, we need to conceptualise the role camera phones take in the playful adaptation of maps and sense of place.

Unquestionably, we see how embedded camera phone practices have become for making sense of everyday life and co-present intimacy across various temporalities, spatialities and histories. With the rise of smartphones and apps that make for easy sharing via social media while on the run (as opposed to first generation where most people uploaded via the computer), movement across different intimate co-presents becomes apparent. They also contribute to the shaping of place by overlaying digital maps with co-present socialities. As Jason Farman notes in his important study on mobile interface theory, mobile media rewrite our relationship to cartography and place (2011). Concurrent with the shift in first- to second-generation camera phone, studies have been the movement of LBS into the mainstream.

With LBS added to the overlay particularly through geo-tagging, camera phones partake in a variety of emplacements across electronic, social, spatial and temporal distances and closeness. This means a departure from the dominant 'network' paradigms in visual/media culture and Internet studies that suppress the significance of movement as a mere node, towards a focus on 'emplacement' whereby people, images and technologies are always situated, in movement and part of and constitutive of place. Emplacement that is how place is situated through and within the movements is central in practice and thus how we conceptualise microblogging. While place has always mattered to mobile media, this is amplified in an age of smartphones as the increasingly dominant, if not only, portal for social media.

Through sharing playful pictures of places as part of everyday movements, camera phone practices provide new ways of mapping place beyond just the geographic: They partake in adding social, emotional, psychological and aesthetic dimensions to a sense of place. Camera phone image sharing illustrates the significant role of co-presence sociality in the practice of place as something more than just geographic or physical. Within the movement of the everyday, camera phone practices emplace across *temporal, spatial* and *social* registers. For example, geo-tagging emplaces the moment to the spatial, while retro filters emplace to temporal

nostalgia. As Nathan Jurgenson argues, the temporal aesthetics of mobile apps such as Instagram are ordered around a 'nostalgia for the present' (2011). As noted in a previous study with Pink LBS camera phone, practices push beyond being a 'snapshot' whereby time and space are frozen—instead, they create new temporal–spatial visual configurations that are embedded with moving cartographies.

Having married the conversations between critical cartography, camera phone apps and ambient play that are informing urban spaces, this chapter now turns to a site-specific mobile game that deploys Instagram and Twitter to create performative cartographies around water and the climate in Japan. The game, *keitai mizu* [mobile water]), was made for a Tokyo post-3/11 tsunami and Fukushima disaster context. *Keitai mizu* renders players into investigators by using the camera phone and Twitter as part of the discovery process in uncovering the natural water streams hidden under the urban cartographies. The game utilises the ambient play of mobile media to allow players to discover their own water story of the place. The shared Instagram pictures offer interpretative, playful and reiterative ways to understand the gameplay space (a park in Shibuya, Tokyo).

2 *Keitai Mizu*: A Site-Specific Mobile Game

> When the earthquake occurred, I was alone in my room playing a monster hunter PSP (PlayStationPortable) game. Exactly at the time, I was fighting with a monster who makes an earthquake so that I didn't realise that an actual, offline quake had occurred. Only after beating down the monster, I realised something different around me. A fish tank had overflowed and books had fallen down. Initially, I was not really shocked by the earthquake itself, but felt frustration with the aftermath—the power failure, panic buying, nuclear accident and such stuff. During this time, I stayed inside with a friend and continued to play the monster hunter game. But the game was no longer entertaining. ('Toshi', 25 Japanese male)

The quote from 'Toshi' sees him playing a haptic game during the 2011 Tokyo earthquake, tsunami and earthquake disaster known as 3/11. Affective and personal technologies such as social and mobile media make us rethink old psychological models of emotion. In times of trauma, mobile media are increasingly becoming a vehicle for material and immaterial textures and contours of grief. Toshi's immersion within the PSP game was so deep that he mistook the quake vibrations for the monster's movements within his game. In the moments after he realised the horror of the real-life event, all he desperately tried to do was to contact friends and family but to no avail. In the days after 3/11 and as multiple and conflicting news reports emerged across mass and social media, Toshi played the game with a friend to hide from the pain and confusion. Later, it emerged that the national broadcaster, NHK, had deliberately withheld important information about the Fukushima reactor under the instructions of the government. For Toshi—like millions of other Japanese—they shifted their trust towards mobile media such as Twitter and LBS like Foursquare and Instagram to help them not only gain a sense

Fig. 1 *Shibuya* underground streams

of intimate publics but to also have a sense of perpetual co-presence with their family and friends.

Given the important role played by camera phone apps such as Instagram and mobile apps such as Twitter within everyday Japanese urban life, we developed a site-specific mobile game, *keitai mizu*. *Keitai mizu* was motivated by the question—how can we harness Twitter and camera phone apps to make a game that deployed ambient play and co-presence to reflected upon the environment in new ways? It was in a post-3/11 context that the art and climate change group *Spatial Dialogues*[1] began to collaborate with the Japanese Boat People Association to develop different artistic ways to map Tokyo sites in terms of the hidden streams, called *Shibuya: Underground Streams.* Given that Tokyo is made up of numerous little rivers underneath all the trains and roads we wanted to make audiences aware that they are literally perpetually *walking on water.*

Through a series of video, sound, game and sculptural narratives, *Shibuya: Underground Streams* sought to make the general public in Tokyo consider the underground streams constituting much of a hidden Tokyo. In particular, the project focused upon one of the busiest places in the world, Shibuya. By placing a shipping container in a park over the month of June 2013, our study sought to explore the idea of cartographies—water, emotional, social, playful, psychological, historical and geographic. One component involved and boat out of water and lost fisherman in the busy intersection of Shibuya crossing (see Fig. 1).

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[1]*Spatial Dialogues* was an Australian Research Council Linkage project.

Japanese and Australian artists were asked to make a series of abstract and representational works of water creatures, which were then placed around the park. The project sought to disrupt dichotomies between art and non-art, water and non-water, game and non-game, seen and hidden, and player and ethnographer. Players had 10 min to hunt for, photograph and share in online various *native-only* water-related creatures and objects that have been placed around the site. They then 'captured' the art with their camera phones and shared it online on Twitter or Instagram. Winners only sent pictures of the native species to the @keitaimizu Twitter account (Fig. 2). The game deployed both old (geo-caching) and new (Twitter and Instagram) media to turn players into ethnographers.

Through playing with ambience, the hidden water streams were brought to the forefront through artworks placed around the park. For many of the participants, they were unaware of the rivers underneath the roads and train tracks. The fact that in many cases, it was hard to distinguish between the art and rubbish in the park meant players were constantly having to analyse all the everyday objects as potential artworks. The slippage between the intentional objects of the game and what was already there further defused the relationship between the art and non-art, and game and non-game space. The artwork was ambient, moving in and out of the background while setting the mood.

Co-presence was a key feature of the game. As players went around photographing and sharing images online, co-present friends (i.e. friends geographically absent but electronically present) began to collaborate and query the pictures taken. Far from eroding a relationship between absence and presence, *keitai mizu* sought to highlight the importance of ambient co-presence in the construction and experience of place. Some co-present friends were co-opted into the game space by trying to help their friends solve the game by guessing what was the art

Fig. 2 *Keitai mizu* (mobile water) game
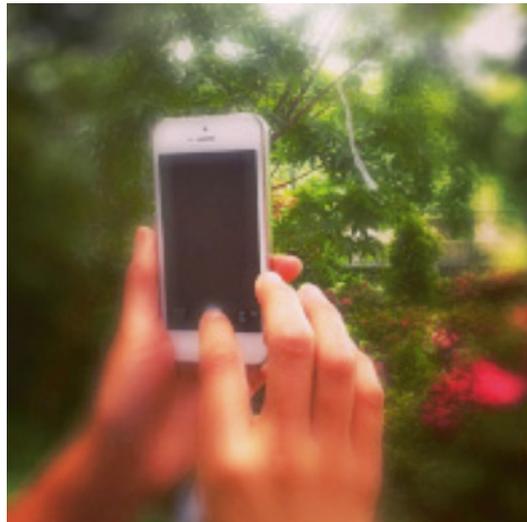
and what was the native to Tokyo water creatures. The game space intentionally blurred online and offline spaces with Instagram and Twitter enabling co-present friends to share the experiences and images. Through the process of gameplay, participants became more mindful of the local water species as well as reflective upon the fact that the city is made up of numerous little rivers underneath all the trains and roads. We wanted to make audiences aware of the hidden water cartographies and how mobile media apps demonstrate how maps are performative—we shape maps as they shape us.

Keitai mizu attempted to challenge boundaries between official and unofficial game spaces by blurring them with different modes of play (Fig. 3). In particular, camera phone practices partake in new haptic visualities that bring emotional and social dimensions of place and play to the official gameplay space and drive the motivation for use. By deploying camera phone practices as part of the mobile game, players can develop the melodramatic elements—the affective and emotional dimensions—to engage friends into the play of being mobile.

Through the playful use of Instagram geo-tagging whereby numerous images of artefacts were assembled upon the Website, players were able to see other players' choices (i.e. what they thought were the native animals) and their location through geo-tagging. This created a sense of emplacement but also displacement as other players searched for some art objects that were either mistaken for
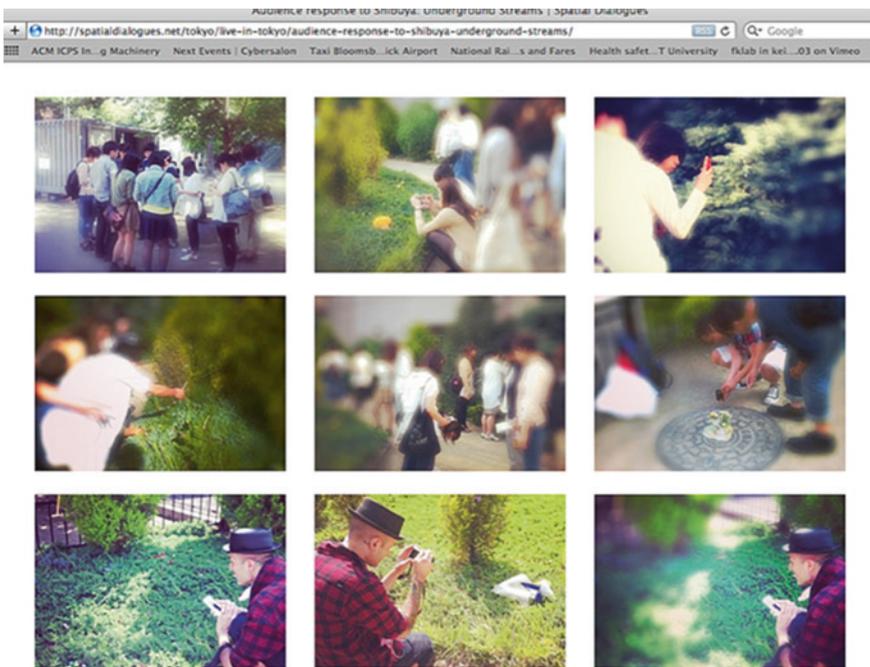

Fig. 3 *Keitai mizu* players

rubbish in the park or too small to see (some artworks, such as Yasuko Toyoshima, were semi-transparent creatures only 5 cm long). The *Spatial Dialogues* Website became a series of emplaced visualities of the park through each of the players' interpretations. The mapping of the park and its underground streams became a series of Instagram clues.

The playing with emplaced visuality was an important component of the game.

As argued elsewhere with Pink (2012), we need a non-representational approach to understanding camera phone photography building on the work of Tim Ingold, Nigel Thrift, Hayden Lorimer and Tim Cresswell. Expanding upon Pink's understanding of photography as produced and consumed in movement and as emplaced within the flow of everyday life, we argued that camera phone photography has little to do with being 'connected' in a 'network'. They are more related to actual, imagined, material, sensory and digital experiences that are affective, embodied and social. In contrast to what he sees as the tendency of network theory to construct a separateness of things, we called for an understanding of camera phone practices that understand the environment as made up of a 'meshwork of lines', or 'texture' (2014). Rather than camera phones being about networked visuality as in the first generation of studies, the notion of emplaced visuality sees the images as embedded within, and through, the movements of the camera phone photographers with their geo-tagging apps adding new dimensions to spatial and temporal movements.
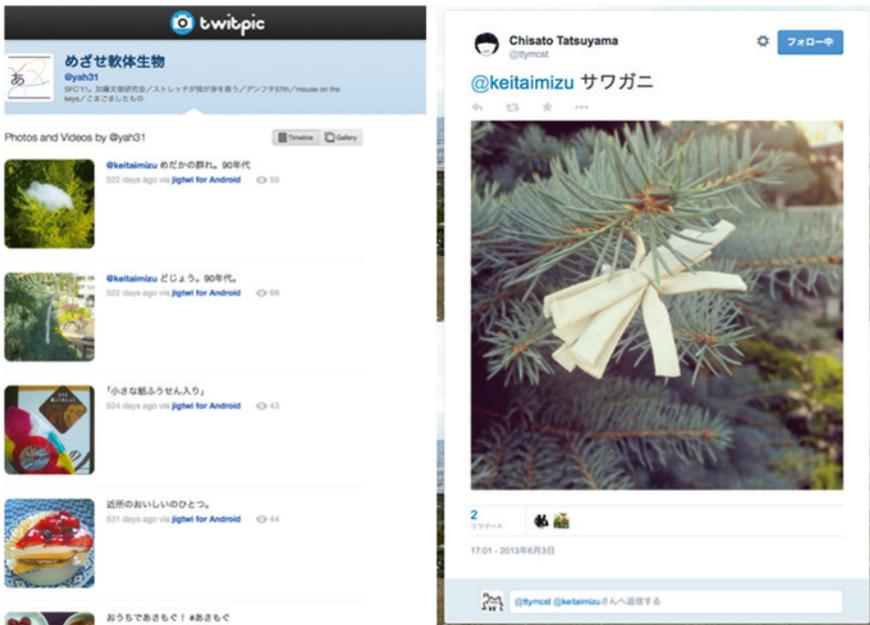

Fig. 4 Co-present and ambient play examples of *keitai mizu*

Part of the enjoyment of the project was not only the entanglements between the methods and its transmission but also how the project lived on in different ways that saw the participants taking the key role. For example, when one student group came through to play, one of the other students took it on herself to document their experiences and responses and turn it into a short film which she then uploaded onto vimeo. This video was one of the few artefacts of transmission left after the ephemeral work had ceased. Moreover, traces of the play could be found in participants' twitter accounts, creating new nodes for co-present entanglement (Fig. 4).

3 Conclusion: Picturing the Urban

In this chapter, I have proposed an understanding of camera phone practices as an important part of how we experience, represent and perform in and through urban spaces. As an omnipresent and yet ambient part of everyday play, mobile media provide new ways in which we can conceptualise cartographies and rethink the role of the citizen in the urban. They provide a lens in which the public and intimate can be interwoven in new ways—what can be called 'intimate publics' (Hjorth and Arnold 2013). The idea that forms of intimacy might be generated in contexts that are simultaneously public is not new. Writing before social media had become an integral part of everyday worlds, Berlant observed that intimacy has taken on new geographies and forms of mobility, most notably as a kind of 'publicness' (1998, 281). However, in a digital–material environment, intimate relations are not simply performed in pairs or in bounded groups. Rather, they traverse the online and offline in that they are performed in physical public worlds, but also in electronic privacy (e.g. when someone privately sends a camera phone image of themselves in a café to a friend), and in an electronic public that is geographically private (e.g. when we read personal messages posted to us in a publicly facing Facebook page or on Twitter, while in the private space of our homes). This informs how we think and practice citizenship.

Camera phone practices are an essential part of the contemporary citizen's tool kit. Camera phone practices also provide us with ways in which to think about Warner's 'counter publics' (2002) whereby the citizen is involved in often quotidian and unofficial place-making exercises that become an embodied part of how they experience the urban. In recent years, social media and online platforms accessed via mobile technologies have become an integral part of digital activism (Postill 2011). Mobile media has been a key in the increasingly active role of citizens in their making and remaking of the urban. Locations such as Tokyo are indicative of this phenomenon (Slater 2011; Slater et al. 2012). Mobile media afford us with new ways to play not just *with* maps but also *in* maps (Perkins 2012). Through the case study of *keitai mizu*, we see how camera phone apps can be re-deployed in a form of geo-caching to rethink and reflect upon the space of the urban. Moreover, their ability to entangle ambient play with intimate

co-presence across different temporality and spatialities means that they can expand upon how we conceptualise the urban.

In exploring camera phone practices in relation to a place-making mobile game, I have sought to provide poetic ways in which players can become investigators in understanding their everyday environments in new ways. As I have argued, camera phone practices contribute to the various performative cartography cultures emerging in and around the urban. They provide more than a thousand words to understand the urban today.

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