Writing space: Examining the potential of location-based composition

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Abstract

People use location-aware mobile applications to both produce and organize information. As scholars have noted, digital information is increasingly being organized by physical location. This article examines how new forms of location-based writing represent an important development for composition scholars. Increasingly, people use mobile applications to write about locations, and those texts then appear when other people travel to those locations. This form of location-based composition shows the potential of understanding how texts can impact how people experience physical space. To understand these forms of writing, this article develops a theoretical framework for understanding these texts and then historicizes location-based writing by discussing earlier forms of locative media art. The article then examines the location-based texts found in the mobile application Foursquare to show that instructors can use mobile applications to teach students about attaching texts to the physical places they describe. This article ultimately argues that location-based texts represent a new form of text, a form of text that should be taught in the composition classroom.

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1. Writing place through mobile composition

Early writing about the Internet often suggested that the digital would overwhelm the physical. A famous MCI commercial discussed the death of distance (Cocca, 2006), Nicholas Negroponte (1995) wrote of bits replacing atoms, and others wrote of the Internet replacing the need for physical movement (Kellerman, 2006). It is now more than 20 years since the development of the World Wide Web, however, and most of us still travel to work, see people face-to-face, and physically travel to visit places. Rather than replace the importance of the physical world, the digital has instead merged with the physical. Increasingly, the digital information we access is organized by physical location, whether on digital maps or through various mobile interfaces. This article discusses how this intertwining of the physical and digital can impact composition by examining a relatively new type of writing: geotagging.

Geotagging refers to pieces of digital information embedded with geographical information that can then be placed on a map of a physical space. People who search for locations on applications like Yelp or check in to locations on applications like Foursquare are presented with those texts, and the texts become a relatively new form of mobile composition that can impact how other people experience a physical space (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012). Geotagging

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is not limited to written texts. Pretty much any piece of digital information can be geotagged. For example, many mobile phone cameras include locational metadata in pictures, allowing people to map the locations at which the pictures were taken.

Although scholars have begun exploring potential impacts of location-based writing, mostly through text messaging (Benedeck, 2006; Comas-Quinn, Mardomingo, & Valentine, 2009) or locative media art pieces (Løvlie, 2011; Tuters & Varnellis, 2006), a significant gap remains in the literature. Namely, most projects—such as Anders Sundnes Løvlie's (2011), Christopher Schmidt's (2011), and Anders Fagerjord's (2011)—focus on specialized software and specific in-class assignments. However, in the last half decade, commercial applications have adopted many of the location-based composition elements present in earlier art projects and have now enabled people to more easily contribute to the annotation of physical space. As more and more people adopt location-based services that enable new composition practices, it is important for composition scholars to begin thinking through both how to theorize this new type of writing and how to incorporate it in the writing classroom. This article takes a step in that direction by focusing not on specialized projects, but rather on the types of writing found in the popular mobile application Foursquare.

To better analyze and understand location-based composition practices, this article takes an interdisciplinary approach that draws from media studies, mobile communication literature, composition scholarship, and locative media art. I begin by describing the case study I draw from in this article: an analysis of the mobile application Foursquare, which is a mobile application that now has more than 55 million users (Foursquare, 2015). I first describe the application and the qualitative research I have done with Foursquare users and then explain the theoretical framework in which I situate mobile composition: hybrid space and spatial legibility. In this section, I use examples from locative media art to discuss how these concepts relate to composition. I then turn to an analysis of my Foursquare data to show how freely available, popular applications can be used to create new types of mobile texts. I use Foursquare as a case study not to argue that Foursquare is ideal for the types of location-based composition described in this article, but rather to show there are a variety of freely available, usable applications instructors can draw from in the composition classroom. The example of Foursquare's approach to geotagging shows how composition instructors can teach students about how locational metadata opens up new rhetorical possibilities for mobile social media.

2. Explanation of Foursquare and my methodological approach

Foursquare is a popular location-based social network that encourages people to form social networks similarly to how they form networks on sites like Facebook. People then go to physical locations and check in, sharing their location with the rest of their Foursquare friends. Foursquare users have now checked in over 7 billion times, and that number continues to grow (Foursquare, 2015). The application also features gaming elements that enable people to compete over mayorships and earn badges for going to certain locations. Most importantly for this article, Foursquare enables people to annotate physical space through what are called tips. If someone leaves a tip at a location, anyone who checks in to that location will then see the tip on the screen of their mobile device (see Figure 1), and the number of user-generated tips recently passed 70 million (Foursquare, 2015) and is growing faster than other applications like Yelp (Carr, 2013). Foursquare also features branded accounts people follow, and users receive alerts if they are near a location at which one of these accounts has left a tip. As I discuss, the tips represent ways in which people both "read" and "write" space and point to new possibilities of encouraging collaboration in the construction of hybrid spaces.

I use Foursquare as a case study for multiple reasons. First, I have been researching Foursquare for the past three years, so I have experience to draw from when exploring how Foursquare can be used for innovative forms of mobile annotation. My research has included three years of participant observation in which I used the application frequently and took extensive notes on the tips I accessed when I checked into locations. These notes have given me a fuller understanding of the types of tips people leave at locations, and most importantly for this article, they have allowed me to identify examples that suggest ways in which Foursquare can be used in the composition classroom. I supplemented my participant observation with 36 interviews with Foursquare users conducted between June 2011 and November