
James Farman’s edited collection *The Mobile Story: Narrative Practices with Locative Media* stems from two central premises. Firstly, and in Farman’s introductory words, the “mobile device is, for many of us, one of our most intimate technologies” (5). What he means by this is not only that our interactions with our mobile devices have become prolific, but also that due to their ubiquitous presence in our day-to-day lives, the device itself is transformed into an extension of the self. Secondly, precisely because mobile media and smart technology are now so pervasive in contemporary global culture, they offer new affordances that can be exploited for narrative ends. Given this elevated cultural omnipresence of the mobile device, the collection sets itself a tall task: to account for the varied narrative practices performed by mobile devices in the twenty-first century.

The collection is comprised of twenty essays and divided into six sections: “Narrative and Site-Specific Authorship,” “Design and Practice,” “Space and Mapping,” “Mobile Games,” “Narrative Interfaces,” and “Memory, History, and Community.” Reading the collection, I felt that the ordering of chapters was somewhat inconsistent. Farman’s introduction, for example, is hidden in the first section, whilst the second section on design interrupts the first “Narrative and Site-Specific Authorship” and the third “Space and Mapping,” which share concerns over location, hybrid spaces, and GPS mapping. As one might expect, the location-focused essays in the collection often relate mobile narratives to Michel de Certeau’s famous ruminations on walking and reading the labyrinthine city. Convincingly, though, they demonstrate that mobile technology, particularly GPS mapping, requires a reformulation and extension of de Certeau’s original thinking. In Koefoed Hansen’s words, mobile media and artistic practice prompt “an informed (re)engagement with space and spatial narratives in ways that both echo and resist de Certeau’s ideas” (137).

The second section, titled “Design and Practice” is, in some ways, slightly disappointing, though the writing is often compelling—particularly Mark Sample’s, despite his repeated claim that “[l]ocation is not compelling” (68ff). Whilst the four chapters in this section outline narrative techniques and detail ideas for real or, in some cases, as yet unrealized mobile storytelling projects, at times they appear tentative or even tenuous in the extent of their engagement with emerging mobile storytelling. Susan Kozel, Mia Keinanen, and Leena Rouhiainen’s chapter discusses their *IntuiTweet* dance project, for instance, which uses Twitter to tweet everyday movements that dancers then perform as improvised choreography. Whilst this is an interesting study of contemporary dance practice and process, it does not appear to reveal much about mobile-specific narrative systems. Barber’s chapter does consider storytelling techniques, but it becomes difficult to take his “results” too seriously since the project to which they relate—Walking-Talking—remains hypothetical.
As a scholar of style and narrative, I found the chapters on “Mobile Games” the most interesting (alongside Paula Levine’s account of spatially-hybrid and empathic art narratives in Chapter 10). Thus having published on Blast Theory’s work, Rowan Wilken’s study of the U.K. art collective’s mobile narratives is particularly relevant. The three essays in the fifth section on “Narrative Interfaces” are rather varied in topic, considering the post-text message novel, Japanese mobile narratives (kkeitai shdsetsu), and the engagement of adults with intellectual disabilities with iPads. The final section on “Memory, History, and Community” focuses on the role and function of mobile narratives, such as apps in museum and community storytelling, though the final essay by Mark C. Marino on The L.A. Flood Project might have sat better alongside earlier chapters more concerned with fictional narratives.

Whilst presenting original scholarship, the book is clearly also marketed for pedagogical use, with a companion website and with each chapter including a list of up to three keywords. Although the keywords offer helpful orientation for student- or non-specialist readers, they may have functioned better as a compiled list at the start of the volume. For any avid readers who progress chronologically through the chapters in the volume, some of these keywords have already arisen in the context of earlier chapters. The companion site features an “Explorations” section with suggested exercises for use in the undergraduate classroom as well as a section titled “Mobile Stories.” The latter is intended as an archive of mobile narratives, but has—at the time of writing this review—only been populated by three works. If curated and kept up-to-date, this archive has the potential to be a useful resource for teachers, students, and scholars alike.

The breadth of focus comprised by The Mobile Story both strengthens and weakens the collection. On the one hand, such breadth enables the book to cross disciplinary boundaries. On the other, it is hard to envisage a scholar whose interests would cover the full range of essays. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that The Mobile Story demonstrates the growing importance of understanding how new technologies enable innovations in narrative techniques and create new forms of contemporary storytelling. For that reason, this is an important book.

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Works Cited