



Exploring environmental perspectives of future mobile lives

Ongoing research

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What place would young people want to give to travel and to their virtual mobility in the territorial organization of their activities, in a future where resources will be restricted, in particular energy? To answer this question, a research team consisting of a physicist-philosopher, a designer, an architect and an artist developed a serious game in which the action takes place in 2061, in Néo Zelbru.

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Although physical and virtual mobility have been elevated to the status of positive norms, *Environmental perspectives of future mobile lives* questions the sustainability of current practices. Effectively, the substantial environmental and energy costs of information and communication technology (ITC) are largely hidden. This project, combining scientific research and art, is founded on the possibility that the resources necessary for the production of ITC will be depleted in the future and not replaced, or that energy and the environment costs linked to their usage will make continuing such intensive practices impossible.

Younger generations have a special attachment to ITC, having developed practices and lifestyles in which these technologies play a key role. How might they imagine a future wherein virtual mobility practices are heavily restricted?

To answer this question, the research team developed an original method of investigation. Its members – a physicist/philosopher, a designer, an architect and a visual artist – are all graduates of the SPEAP (Sciences Po – Experimentation in arts and politics) master's program directed by Bruno Latour. Their goal is to test new ways of addressing research topics, by associating the resources of art and science.

The first stage identified the sensitive and functional qualities that underlie attachment to ITC. Emphasis was placed on two concepts. The first concept was that of "saver" (of time, energy, etc.). Based on a historic survey of practices developed to replace old practices, in the hopes of reducing material and environmental costs, the team explored the idea of virtual mobility as an automatic alternative to physical mobility.

A survey of people in Belgium who intensively practice different forms of role-playing (board games, life-sized games, video games and LAN parties) served as a springboard for addressing the second point regarding virtual mobility, which the team considers essential: their ability to "create a bubble", to envelop users in an intimate setting while opening us a whole world. Virtual mobility was therefore compared with role players' manner of "creating bubbles".

The second phase of the project consists of the launching of a role-playing game that takes place in a world where resources are extremely limited. Workshops designed with game, prospective and virtual mobility specialists, as well as young ICT users, will be set up. This approach aims to address head on the environmental consequences of virtual mobility practices and to identify desirable mobile lifestyles in a future of limited energy resources.

The project will give way to a game project in late 2016, highlighting the issue of virtual mobility in an environmental perspective. A research report describing the investigation process and the results will also be developed.

The project is part of the Mobile Lives Forum's first research axis, *Understanding - Mobile and immobile lifestyles: how do we experience mobility today?*

The second phase of the project was to develop a narrative game [1], 2061, in order to investigate the research question and explore the aspirations of young people in terms of travel and the trade-offs they make between physical and virtual mobilities.

Immersed in the city of Néo Zelbru in 2061, players build their characters and tell their stories. However, the world is challenging in 2061. The situation in terms of resources

makes every action a bit more complicated... The environmental and energy crisis has profoundly changed how people live and move around. All actions, whether physical or virtual, have a chance to fail... In the first round, players define the story of their characters, their activity and personality as well as the relationships they have with the other players' characters. There are 14 neighborhoods to choose from that act as a starting point of the story. These neighborhoods have different geographical and socio-economic characteristics: the marsh, the digital city, the suburban neighborhoods... In the second round, a large event - for example a cyber-attack that destabilizes the city's whole computer system - launches the plot and guides the evolution of the characters in the city of Néo Zelbru.

This game has been test-played around fifteen times with students of different ages and academic levels, in the regions of Brussels, Paris and Lyon. These games were finely documented through a written account of how they played out and exchanges between players. They were then analyzed by the research team and by a group of researchers from the studies, research and expertise office Mobil'Homme (MoHo).

This analysis evidenced how useful the game is as a data collection tool; indeed, the games provide insightful information on the issue at hand by producing data in a more liberated and unfiltered setting than a semi-directed interview. Indeed, in interview settings, several factors can bring the subjects to control what they do or say, such as dominance effects related to their social status or that of the researcher, pressure related to the interview situation itself, or their desire to present themselves in a good light... These biases can be partly avoided with the game as it allows players to act and speak more spontaneously and free from external judgment since their decisions are attributed to their characters and not to themselves. However, this same advantage introduces its own bias regarding the collected data, insofar as the actions of the characters, while being completely free, don't necessarily reflect the actual aspirations of the players. Another drawback of this method is that it requires a lot of time, not only to play the game but also to talk about it afterwards. That being said, the analysis of the games that were played did provide some lessons:

Lesson no. 1: Physical mobilities enable social mobilities, by allowing players to move away from the environment they were born into, to meet other people, to change their social status, etc. This is also the case, to a lesser extent, with virtual mobilities.

Lesson no. 2: The players make trade-offs between physical mobility and virtual exchanges depending on their situation and their preferences. In some cases, physical and virtual mobility are interchangeable: players can choose to travel rather than talk remotely when communication networks are unreliable, broken or under surveillance; conversely, communicating remotely occasionally replaces travel, when physically moving is too difficult.

Lesson no. 3: Players, however, often prefer to physically move and they do so for several reasons. For instance, important collective actions require coordination and trust, both of which are harder to achieve through virtual relationships, as they are more artificial and thus less reliable. This distrust of virtual relationships is reinforced by their lack of technical reliability and the threat of being monitored. Finally, the preference of these young students for physical travel can also be explained by a resistance they expressed to the virtualization of communications and experiences: indeed for them virtual reality friends, events and journeys can't replace real-world experiences and face-to-face encounters.

Lesson no. 4: It's worth noting that generally, facing the constraints of 2061, players didn't travel less than they do today, but they did so by other means, including soft modes of transport and vehicles powered by renewable energies. However, not all of the participants appreciated the energy constraints of the game in the same way. Some showed very little regard for these constraints and didn't really take them into account when making decisions.

The last part of the research studies the possibilities of publishing and spreading 2061 and how it could be received by a young audience, in the hope of increasing its potential for raising awareness about environmental issues related to mobility.

To go further (available in French only)

Synthesis

Final report

[1] A narrative game is a game in which players build a story together. The story develops as players take actions which are more or less free depending on the level of constraints imposed by the rules of the game. There isn't one good way to play: each action is legitimate and the game's outcome matters less than the process of playing it and the narrative it can produce.

Mobility

Broadly, the word mobility can be defined as the intention to move and the realization of this movement in geographical space, implying a social change.

More

Lifestyle

A lifestyle is a composition of daily activities and experiences that give sense and meaning to the life of a person or a group in time and space.

More

Keywords : [Art](#), [Virtual Mobilities](#), [Lifestyles](#), [Forecasting](#), [Collective representations](#)

Disciplines : [Humanities](#), [Prospective studies](#), [Art](#), [litterature and design](#)

Transport mode(s) : [All modes of transport](#)

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² <http://owncloud.forumviesmobiles.org/index.php/s/A3XDSAcSI0jteXI>

³ <http://owncloud.forumviesmobiles.org/index.php/s/N30rQ8UKbSEnGu4>

⁴ <http://en.forumviesmobiles.org/marks/mobility-450>

⁵ <http://en.forumviesmobiles.org/marks/lifestyle-1756>

⁶ <http://en.forumviesmobiles.org/mots-cles/art>

⁷ <http://en.forumviesmobiles.org/mots-cles/mobilites-virtuelles>

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