Umea Institute of Design
Interaction Design MA
Graduation project proposal - first abstract
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# Mapping Experiences

*"For walk where we will, we thread upon some story"*
Cicero [1]

## Summary

New locative media technologies impact the process of map making and give regular people the power to generate maps both individually and communally through web 2.0 services. But the spaces mapped carry layers of information and meaning that are not currently displayed in most purely geographical mapping. The project investigates the relationship between people and space by the creation of digital annotations in space of individual or group experiences.

## Introduction

The project is inserted in the discussion of the impact of new technologies in the map making activity, and its consequences in the technical, philosophical and social spheres.
New technologies such as location based devices, broad band connectivity and wireless access together have imposed many changes to the map making activity empowering regular people to produce and publish maps in a way that only professional cartographers did before. This ancient human activity has suffered many transformations over the time, but none with the amplitude and reach of this last one. Today one individual is able to tag a route or path and upload this information to web sites that accumulate several paths weaving a network of amateur and personal traced ways, in a typical web 2.0 service. Or go online and modifying and editing previously created base maps personalizing them. [www.mapme.com/] New behaviors and social interactions are also being predicted:

> *Yet, even with this unprecedented automation of mapping, there are vast areas still unmapped by tourist photos on Flickr and Google Streetview. That back alley in Venice, the backyard of that house in Burwood.*
> *These are the places that will be sought out by the new cartographers — the terrain spotters (yes! awesome pun) — armed with GPS enabled cameras and wifi memory cards adding to the pool of data as they snap previously untagged walls and openings. A cross between the box-ticking-archi-tourist and the seafaring explorer, intrepid photographers scouring databases for portions of buildings not yet assimilated into the Master Model. Over time uncharted areas will become increasingly difficult to find, sending photographers into more and more obscure places, lonelier towns, and cities too dangerous to tempt Google. And then of course, as buildings tend to change more rapidly than geography, the news of alterations to the built fabric — a new window, a coat of paint, the demolition of a structure, a new billboard — will launch a new rush to correct the data. The terrainspotters work will never be over their curation and collation never complete, the realization of the ultimate fantasy of any serious collector.[2]*

## Mapping and the web 2.0

And although these new technologies and visualization possibilities influence deeply the way we read and interact with maps, it also places interesting questions regarding the production of the map and the new producers of  maps, also a characteristic of web 2.0 where consumers of information are also the producers:

> *Much of the story of map-making over the past five years centres on the rise of amateurs such as Mr. Ajmani. Using powerful online mapping tools, they are redefining the millenniums-old field of cartography, earning both critics and admirers in the process. Their products are not maps in the traditional sense, but mash-ups, which combine traditional charts - hosted by mammoth tech companies such as Google and Microsoft - with some unusual spatial data: UFO sightings, public toilet locations or the whereabouts of England's worst potholes, to name a few.*
> *"We call it the democratization of spatial data," said Sally Hermansen, senior instructor in the University of British Columbia's department of geography. "They are redefining how we think about the world, how we organize the world." [3]*

### The map is not the territory

Still, technical and road maps are instruments of knowledge, control and power. Many of the technologies that are now available to the public have their roots in military research. Precision, accountability and reliability were always issues in maps. This quest for precision inspired writers and philosophers in the past, notably Jorge Luis Borges with his “On Exactitude in Science” or “On Rigor in Science” (the original Spanish-language title is “Del rigor en la ciencia”) [4]. In the same line of though, “The map is not the territory” is a remark by Alfred Korzybski, encapsulating his view that an abstraction derived from something, or a reaction to it, is not the thing itself. [5]

### Representing reality

However, the increasing computational power available today renders in every computer screen photographic representations of the world and beyond with relief simulations and even day/ night differentiation. Technology is trying to make us believe that, through the screen, the map can be the territory. Some experts predict in the media [6] that virtual realities such as Second Life are the future while the recently released document “Metaverse Roadmap” [7] bets on a simulated 3D web as the future of living spaces. These perspectives place us more and more in front of the screens, be it a desktop, laptop or mobile device. These mediated experiences of the world increase some of the possible human experiences, but not all, being still absolutely based on representations of things, no matter how powerful and precise they are.

> *“What happens when video games meet Web 2.0? When virtual worlds meet geospatial maps of the planet? When simulations get real and life and business go virtual? When you use a virtual Earth to navigate the physical Earth, and your avatar becomes your online agent? What happens is the metaverse.*
> *Taking its name from the immersive virtual world imagined by Neal Stephenson in his visionary novel, Snow Crash, the Metaverse Roadmap (MVR) is the first public ten-year forecast and visioning survey of 3D Web technologies, applications, markets, and potential social impacts. Areas of exploration include the convergence of Web applications with networked computer games and virtual worlds, the use of 3D creation and animation tools in virtual environments, digital mapping, artificial life, and the underlying trends in hardware, software, connectivity, business innovation and social adoption that will drive the transformation of the World Wide Web in the coming decade.” [7]*

### Augmenting reality

In a different perspective, urban planners and professional cartographers bet on Ambient Intelligence, and the fusion of the map and the physical world in the form of digital annotation of spaces. From this perspective, one of the foreseen consequences would be the resurgence of the public space as a democratic arena. In this arena, the new cartographers revisit the flanêur, or the stroller - reader of the streets, a 19th century character that embodies the modern individuals as they appropriate the urban spaces.

One of the main advocates of this point of view is Ben Russell, that while working for a tech company in Silicon Valley became excited by the emerging technology of what is now labeled Locative Media. His Headmap Manifesto is widely regarded as a stimulating force behind many projects.

> *there are notes in boxes that are empty*
> *every room has an accessible history*
> *every place has emotional attachments you can open and save*
> *you can search for sadness in New York*
> *“The Internet has already started leaking into the real world.*
> *Headmap argues that when it gets truly loose the world will be new again.” [8]*

With this tone, the HeadMap points towards the maximum “Know your place” which opens a new dimension to the problem, the notions of place and space. In the text this notion is developed with passages from sociological and anthropological studies describing how Australian Aborigines attach meaning to places through narratives:

> *Many Europeans have spoken of the uniformity and featurelessness of the Australian landscape. The aborigines, however, see the landscape in a totally different way. Every feature of the landscape is known and has meaning - they then perceive differences which Europeans cannot see. These differences may be in terms of detail or in terms of a magical or invisible landscape, the symbolic space being even more varied than the perceived physical space. As one, example, every individual feature of Ayer's Rock is linked to a significant myth and the mythological beings who created it. Every tree, every stain, hole and fissure has meaning. [AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINES AND THE DEFINITION OF PLACE found in Shelter Sign and Symbol ed. Paul Oliver - Barrie and Jenkins 1975][8]*

Inspired by these ideas, the HeadMap claims that:

> *A new layer of symbolism, a new way of defining ownership and meaning could be overlaid on the old. Invisible on the surface. New paths, new meeting places, new boundaries. New meaning associated with old structures. [8 - page 7]*

In doing so, the geographical data becomes infrastructure, the stage where lives are lived and experiences happen. The subject of my exploration is the addition of a layer of life, of human experiences. It goes beyond the overlay of information, currently provided by services such as Google Maps and so many others. A previous attempt has been made in this direction, when two graphic designers from Holland published the Atlas of Experience. [9]

### PROJECT OBJECTIVES

In this sense, this project is an amalgam of several topics previously mentioned, it has its roots in the current movement of the "neo-cartography" where new technologies labeled as Locative Media and trends from the Web 2.0 modify the activity of producing, interacting with and the very content of maps. It focuses though in the map as augmentation of reality through digital annotations of the physical space, not the representation of space in a form of visualization. The project accepts the invitation from the HeadMap manifesto and takes some ideas present in its pages, and uses its many references as inspiration.

The area to be mapped, is human experience, the individual and collective journeys, including the paths and the memories and mementos that are part of these journeys. All the other information is then subordinate to the experience, or what the user considers as the real experience. The concept of journey is also borrowed from the Australian aborigines as described in the HeadMap manifesto:

> *"Song lines are the sound equivalents of the spacial [sic] journeys of the ancestors, the lines of which are found also inscribed in Aboriginal paintings and carvings. They detail the travels of the ancestors and each verse may be read in terms of the geographical features of the landscape. Encoded within them are the great ceremonies which reactivate the Dreamtime in the present." Mudrooroo, Aboriginal Mythology*

> *A journey (not a road or a path), and ritual associated with that journey were at the heart of the aboriginal understanding of their relationship to the land. A central idea in human culture is the journey. A journey is a fundamental way in which we relate to space. We move from one place to another in a linear sequence. The idea of the journey is central to our myths and stories, it is encoded in our architecture and implied in our built environment, the streets outside our houses, the paths through the woods, the networks of freeways... [8]*

The concept is an extension of a cartesian system. The rational system of coordinates is used to link to irrational, emotional aspects of life instead of merely a cold label or a service. For instance you could search for sadness in New York, or happiness in Paris.

In short, users could publish their morning walks, have uses beyond utility, find the echoes of the people that have been somewhere before them. Geography adds a whole new dimension to the internet, and information is actively overlaying the real space. In so, this project is targeted to regular people instead of professional cartographers for two reasons: first is to capture a wider audience and the second is not to limit the experiences to be mapped.

## ADVANTAGES

In a time when wireless internet capability will be provided by cities just as street lights are provided now, people will reclaim public space, forge new connections, through an extra layer of annotation invisibly etched onto space. By giving people the tools to map the space according to their experiences or map the experiences themselves on the space, people become more aware of the space that surrounds them. They pay more attention to it and its subtleties and in this process, new relations are forged to that space, relations of identity and belonging. In a more automated perspective, people can also be aware of the virtual traces they leave in space without noticing, every time they connect to the information network through the phone, credit card transactions etc.

## OPEN QUESTIONS

Still, there are open questions, there are several levels to develop this idea. One is to figure out the real mechanisms of making such annotations work and how would people actually do it. Another approach is to investigate the visual language, signs, symbols that would be used to generate this map. Would it have a device? Would it use the current mobile phones?

One other approach would be to project this in the future, assume the service would be available and develop how people would create their maps, investigating what kind of experiences are map able, and what would people actually do with it in case it was there.

## METHODS

These questions would be better answered in the development of the project, collecting input from real people on the subject according to the scandinavian tradition of participatory design. Answers will emerge and be shaped by brainstorms and participatory workshops conduced with both regular users and professional cartographers. Similarities and differences will be used to point the project directions.

## REFERENCES:


[1] Cicero, Cited in Universal Experience, p.116 MCA, Chicago, 2004.

[2] http://supercolossal.ch/2008/08/22/terrainspotting/

[3] http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/story/RTGAM.20081003.wlmapmakers03/BNStory/lifeMain/

[4] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/On_Exactitude_in_Science

[5] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Map/territory_relation

[6] http://edition.cnn.com/2007/TECH/08/07/virtual.living/

[7] http://metaverseroadmap.org/

[8] Headmap Manifesto: www.technoccult.com/library/headmap.pdf

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