

Peripato Telematikos

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Abstract

This paper describes my current project “Peripato Telematikos”, an experiment in social cartography and public authoring, drawing influences from peripatetic art practices. The project relies on public participation to ‘map’ a locale or neighbourhood. The mapping process requires participants to undertake guided walks and use a mobile phone to send images of interest during the walk. The images are sent to a custom hardware and software system. Once approved content is immediately available for viewing and manipulation through an web start application at the website <http://www.peripato.net>. The applet implements an experimental interface developed by the Human-Computer Interaction Lab (HCIL) at the University of Maryland that allows ‘zooming’ of all content. This allows the content to be manipulated by visitors to the site, allowing for an emergent montage of media elements.

Introduction

This paper describes my current project “Peripato Telematikos”, an experiment in social cartography and public authoring, drawing influences from performance studies and art.

[T]here is a cresting wave, and it awaits skilled surfers (Cosgrove, 2006)

This is a quote from a 2006 special issues of *Cartographic Perspectives* (the journal of the North American Cartographic Information Society) on art and maps. The special issue gives a good summary of the current intersections of art and maps and notes its prevalence but also signifies the importance of the work being conducted in these intersecting fields. It also asks why this might be happening.

Concept

Map making has a long and complex political, social and cultural history. Maps have long been used by controlling forces as a means of consolidating their

power. The mapmaker controls the territory that is being mapped, and attempts to represent with a “totalising eye” as de Certeau (1984) asserts in “The Practice of Everyday Life”. But maps can no longer satisfy the needs of representation in an increasingly complex and ever-changing world. Representations of the world rapidly become obsolete and inaccurate. But what is needed? Can a map incorporate time? How do we avoid creating representations that encompass all that is problematic with traditional map making?

What is emerging is that maps are not being used to represent reality but to construct reality through the interventions of people.

As Deleuze (1988) says, a map is “an abstract machine. It is a machine that is almost blind and mute, even though it makes others see and speak” (34). The map is a machine oriented towards experimentation with the real. It is “abstract” because the map in no way represents what is actual and determined, but instead offers a field of potential space, an array of potential uses of the actual. It is a “machine” because of its ability to bring heterogenous elements of a system into connection with one another. The map is software in this sense. (Kanarinka, 2006, p25)

There are many projects where the intent is to imbue maps with personal, subjective information or content to convey more than the official and trumpeted objective representation of place. Many of these representations solicit public participation for their creation and hence are authored by the public. The research has revealed the activity by media artists, many drawing influences from the Situationist Internationale, an influential collective that explored and critiqued the urban environment of Paris, creating experiential maps from their experiences or ‘derives’ and coining such terms as ‘psychogeography’. Assisted by the emergence of wireless technologies and

cheaper and more accessible GPS capabilities, and open source online tools (eg. google maps) many projects seek to create these representations assisted by the technologies available.

Cartography is the study and practice of making maps. [...] Maps are inherently problematic. First of all, they assume an “objective” reality: a version of the world that can be inscribed, framed, and trusted. [...] The second fatal flaw of maps is that they have been used, throughout political history, as weapons in political power struggles. [...] Maps are drawn by the dominant power, and that is why they’re such powerful documents. It’s also why they’re so dangerous, and it’s why the recent movement by artists to reclaim cartography is of such enormous importance. (TPW Gallery 2007)

The project relies on public participation to ‘map’ a locale or neighbourhood.

The use of participants to create a work is by no means a new idea and has many precedents in art. From the early surrealist experiments in collaborative authoring to more recent phenomena such as the plethora of what are called web 2.0 applications, which mostly rely on public contributions. But what is to be gained from allowing the public to author these maps? As the places being explored and documented are the spaces that the participants frequent, it is their perception and concerns of their locale that is important. Furthermore, as Kanarinka states:

The collective can be thought of as an explicit act of cultural resistance in that the group functions as a refusal of an increasingly engineered individual subjectivity. (Kanarinka 2006: 28)

The mapping process requires participants to undertake guided walks and use a mobile phone to send images of interest during the walk. A few images per participant can be sufficient but this is dependant upon the number of people involved and the area covered. For example, in the work “One Block Radius”, a single city block in New York is ‘mapped’.

A project of Brooklyn artists Christina Ray and Dave Mandl (known collaboratively as Glowlab), is an extensive psychogeographic survey of the

block where New York’s New Museum of Contemporary Art will build a new facility in late 2004. Engaging a variety of tools and media such as blogs, video documentation, maps, field recordings & interviews, Glowlab creates a multi-layered portrait of the block as it has never been seen before [and will never be seen again]. (Glowlab 2004)

The mode of walking is informed by walking practices from art. This is not enforced (and could not be in a work that is open to anonymous participation) but is drawn upon where the walks are conducted in a more controlled situation, such as personal walks, workshops or other focus groups.

They are collected using a mobile phone with a camera and MMS capabilities. Usability has become an issue. This need has been addressed by:

1. Making use of mobile phones’ MMS capabilities. Other dedicated applications that would serve a similar function are problematic. The multitude of mobile phone platforms represents a significant barrier to creating a single mobile phone application to facilitate the sending of images to a server. In order to maximise potential participation, a standard facility (i.e. MMS) is used.
2. Despite this, a suitable application is in development and will allow for the uploading of an image from the phone to a server. There are a number of reasons as to why this is being pursued. In many instances, the project will be run in more controlled environments, where customised mobile phones will be provided for the participants that will allow the uploading of images, with less user intervention than is possible using MMS. A custom application can also be considerably cheaper to use than standard MMS. MMS costs are fixed regardless of the content being sent whereas a custom application can use other means to keep costs down.

I have chosen walking as the prime means of exploring place and space. This draws on my research of art practices that somehow incorporate walking as a means of expression. Why walking? In order to gain some knowledge of our places, there is simply no other mode of locomotion that allows for an intimate experience with our surrounds. Walking in art can be traced back to include such luminaries as Baudelaire (“the botanist of the sidewalk”) and Benjamin (Arcades Project). More recent examples include Richard Long and Hamish Fulton for whom

walking is primary in their art, Sophie Calle, whose "Suite Vientiene" is a well-known work where she stalked a stranger and Marina Abramovich and Ulay (The Lovers), who walked from opposite ends of the Great Wall of China as a parting gesture to mark the end of their relationship and collaborations.

In more recent times, the prevalence of art incorporating walking in some form can be ascertained by the number of conferences and exhibitions being held worldwide. For example:

1. Walking as knowing as making // a peripatetic investigation of place spring 2005 // university of illinois
2. Conflux is the annual New York festival for contemporary psychogeography.
3. Walk Ways brings together a selection of works by a diverse group of artists who explore the theme of walking as an action and/or as a metaphor.

Technology

The images taken by participants are sent immediately via MMS or the custom application, to a custom hardware and software system, comprising a gsm/gprs modem, sms/mms gateway software, php scripts and a mysql database.

MMS is an acronym for Multimedia Messaging System. Similar to the more commonly used SMS or text message, but with the added capability of incorporating images, audio and video content in a single message.

All entries are stored in a mySQL database and await approval. Approval of images before they are released into public realm is a major consideration during these times of heightened anxiety about the use of mobile phones for capturing unsolicited images.

Photographers' blogs are tangled with long threads of discussions about what may or may not be allowed, and are bulging with stories of police, security and members of the public stopping them from taking photographs. (Giles 2007: 23)

The images need to be vetted for appropriateness and suitability. A secure web page is provided for administrators of the project that displays the image as it is received in real time, and provides a simple mechanism for approving the image. Once approved, the

main viewing page loads the image from the database. The main viewing page will load the image as it polls the database at regular intervals to check for newly approved images. Once approved the images are immediately available for viewing and manipulation through a web start application at the url <http://www.peripato.net>

The application allows for the participants to return to the site and view their submitted images, and manipulate this content in relation to other content, closing the loop by giving control of look of the 'map' or montage to the participants. The content can also be manipulated in further ways: Text annotations can be added to existing content, links can be created, associating content with other content, and the spatial layout can be saved.

In a nutshell, this scheme allows the content to be manipulated by visitors to the site, allowing for an emergent montage of media elements.

The applet implements an experimental interface developed by the Human-Computer Interaction Lab (HCIL) at the University of Maryland that allows spatial manipulation and 'zooming' of all content. (Human-Computer Interaction Lab)

Thus far I have discussed the most visible aspects of the technology enabling the project. Other components that play a crucial role include: the gsm/gprs modem, the sms/mms gateway software (nowSMS), many php scripts to handle content and the mysql database.

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