

Lost in Location

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“Innovations to make life easy” (TomTom) and “We’ll take you there” (Garmin) — the corporate slogans of personal navigation companies promise to make the owner’s life more comfortable with a GPS device (aka: SatNav). Nevertheless, stories on lost drivers continue to flood the media.¹ Users are repeatedly led astray or into accidents by their devices, and experts are commenting on the reasons while SatNav companies promise better devices, better algorithms, better interfaces and better maps. In the following, I will argue that neither algorithms, interfaces nor maps are to blame; rather it is the way that the devices situate users in locations that causes drivers to drive into lakes and find themselves stuck on narrow roads. By analyzing artworks that perform their location and thus aim to heighten the participant’s awareness of the space s/he’s in, I will argue that overcoming these SatNav strayings is first and foremost a matter of understanding how these mobile devices remove the user’s location awareness.

Situating people

As de Certeau notes, the city can be accessed in two ways: from outside through the map or from within as a pedestrian. Concretely as well as metaphorically, these two views represent different ways of understanding a location: the structurally abstract place or the socially and historically embedded space. The relationship between the map and the street was challenged by the situationists with their *dérives* and subjective maps: *The Naked City* by artists Jorn and Debord visualizes Paris as space; walks in Paris’ neighborhoods resulted in a psychogeographical map depicting the pedestrian’s experience of the city.

Like the situationists, I am interested in the continuum between place and space; in the frictions between street level and map. SatNavs appears to remove the inconveniences of the map by creating street-level routes instead of overview maps but there is something wrong with the way it conceptualizes the street level and situates people. Manovich argues that the city is becoming an augmented space containing various ‘invisible’ information layers; I am further arguing that — while

at the location — badly designed mobile artifacts get people lost when they navigate this augmented space because the city becomes abstracted (cf. Lefebvre and also Flanagan), whereas well-designed artifacts situate people in the locational context.

To (be) situate(d)

Where a SatNav aims at eliminating the abstraction of the map, several artworks suggest other poetics of space by challenging the map-view. Through exploring the place-space continuum and explicitly investigating strategies for situating the participant, the four cases below create different frictions between map and street.

At the space-end of the continuum are Janet Cardiff’s audio walks. Played on a mobile audio device, walks are site-specific artworks giving directions layered on a background of recorded but site-specific sounds plus a narrative element related to the sites experienced en route. Participants are situated in the location because Cardiff’s narration highlights location properties through the poetically constructed directions while they blend with real-life sounds present during the walk. The experience of the location is thus tied to Cardiff’s narrative interpretation of the location and by following in Cardiff’s footsteps the participant is sensing the location’s space.

Participants in Blast Theory’s performance *Rider Spoke* interactively investigate the city by bike with a location aware mobile device. Participants roam the city’s streets looking for locations to record short messages or search for messages recorded by others. As opposed to Cardiff’s audio walks, *Rider Spoke* does not have a fixed route or narrative; participants are left to experience the city by themselves in a contemporary Situationist *dérive* where the acts of recording and listening to messages lead the way. The experience of the city is tied to being on constant lookout for both cars and suitable spots which inflicts some degree of investigative situatedness. However, as Flanagan argues is the case with Blast Theory’s earlier works, *Rider Spoke* is not a situating performance in Lefebvrian terms. Thus, *Rider Spoke*

is *not* a *dérive* but still becomes site-specific during the course of the performance because of the recorded messages. *Rider Spoke*'s poetics of space is thus concerned with investigating the frictions themselves.

Lastly, in Nokia's N-Gage game platform gamers play against other N-gamers either close-by through Bluetooth or remotely through GSM. In the N-Gage commercials, empty city landscapes suddenly come to life when a lone person starts playing, thus implying that the city in itself has no life apart from the augmented space accessed anywhere and independently of location via the mobile phone. To Nokia, the city has no social space until the N-Gage is put into play.

Although the cases presented above represent three different points along the place-space continuum, they all express a poetics concerned with representing how the city thwarts augmented space and the resulting frictions.

Being location aware

Unlike N-Gage's location aware but location independent setup, the very analog *Lost-Found Series* by Meredith Warner amplifies a site's characteristics as she unravels and re-knits lost, knitted objects to the place she found them. The reknitting does not create a location aware object, but it can serve as an image of what a SatNav does not do: situate the user. By integrating the found objects into the surroundings and pointing out the site's space-ness by means of the alien object, the steady artist's hand becomes the intermediary between alien and location in the same way that Cardiff is the intermediary between participant and location. Even though there are many differences, both artists point to overlooked aspects of the location and by perceiving these aspects, participants become location aware.

Contrary to the stray users of SatNavs, both audio walk participants and spectators of *Lost-Found* quite simply experience the location they're at instead of just walking

through. The same goes for *Rider Spoke*'s cyclists and to a lesser degree also the N-Gage users as both articulate the invisible properties of the place — that is the space-ness of the place. The SatNav aims at doing the opposite as the map is understood as an inconvenience to be eliminated. The SatNav tries to transform map into street view but in reality the location specificity disappears from the user's perception. Unknowingly, s/he understands locations from the map's perspective while under the impression that s/he is navigating the street view. In continuation of the Situationists, the SatNav designs an experience of the location traversed so abstract and permeated by the authoritarian logic of the map that the user is unable to subjectively experience the space. The different strategies for situating participants presented above prove that location aware technology alone does not make a location aware user. Applying these strategies to SatNavs would allow for subjective experiences of locations; drivers would be location aware instead of lost in location.

1 As e.g. <<http://www.themobilecity.nl/2008/02/19/sat-nav-mishaps/>> show examples are many

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