DÉRIVE IN THE DIGITAL GRID, BREAKING THE SEARCH TO GET LOST

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Abstract

This paper seeks to explore whether the psychogeographic technique of dérive can be used to break out of the directed pattern of 'search to find' in the online space following from Lev Manovich's concept of the Poetics of Navigation [1].
An online psychogeographical dérive could be a form of digital resistance to the various ways information is being dictated to us from contemporary authoritarian rules and search engines.

Key words: derive, text, psychogeographies, digital technologies, grid.

Introducing: walking practice and dérive in the real city

Throughout the twentieth century, urban walking has been regarded as an aesthetic practice and critical tool for exploration, critique and immersion in the ever-changing city. Two great concepts that have been associated with the former are the flaneur and psychogeographical dérive. Both walking concepts and the city have also been grasped through metaphorical schemas from time to time. Metaphor will constitute a significant approach throughout this paper to delineate further interconnections between the physical and the virtual.

Returning to "real" life, a series of artists, poets and cultural theorists have practiced flanerie in one way or another. Examples include George Simmel, the Surrealists, Walter Benjamin, the Situationists International, Michel de Certeau and contemporary walking artists. In every case, it was the city that constituted the main platform for expression and an influential space for exploration or even actual or symbolic resistance. Walter Benjamin practiced flanerie in the city by producing significant cultural texts on the experiences and reflections he had. His metaphorical expression of the flaneur who 'goes botanizing on the asphalt' [2] reveals the interrelation of

the urban walking practice with a variety of social, sensorial and spatial encounters. However, the Benjaminian flaneur was characterized by a kind of melancholia – a condition triggered by the city that is no longer a "fruitful" labyrinth of chance encounters for him.

Drawing from the former, the Haussmannization [3] of Paris brought an electrification and illumination of the streets as well as a regeneration of them. The Parisian boulevards became not only dynamic sites of transience but also sites of spectacle [4]. The concept of the flaneur came to be interrogated by the coming of Situationists International [5]. Guy Debord – among other members – called for a critique of the society of the spectacle, which is something that goes hand in hand with the multiparametric character of the city. Situationists International continued the walking practice within the city but their approach was far more active than the flanerie practiced by previous practitioners such as Benjamin and the Surrealists. Situationists International's central aim was the 'construction of momentary ambiances of life' [6] and the main tool for this accomplishment was the walking technique of psychogeographical dérive [7].

Dérive's main goal was the construction of situations through a 'rapid changing of ambiances' [8] by focusing on a real pleasure of movement and not on the 'manufactured desire of spectacle' [9]. However, the methodological backbone of dérive was not based totally on random factors but on simple directional algorithms. An example of such an algorithm could be: "Go left, go left, go right", which interacted with urban randomness but without other motivations. Psychogeographical dérive can be grasped as a resistive practice – totally willing to detach itself from the everyday spectacle of the city and the further conditions it entailed such as boredom and alienation. This resistive quality in urban walking is apparent in the words of Michel de Certeau, as he describes everyday urban walking as a spatial process able to affirm, transgress, suspect and respect [10].

Setting the metaphors: the city as Internet and walking as virtual navigation

As the intention of this paper is to interrogate the potential application of dérive in the virtual environment of Internet networks, it is tempting to initiate such an interrogation through a set of metaphors. The ever-changing complex char-

acter of the twentieth and twenty-first century city renders it a landscape of spatial, social, economic and emotional encounters and as such - flows. The urban landscape is no longer a material space to be traversed and lived, as aspects of it have been augmented through what it has been described as the data cloud. We could suggest that the Benjaminian flaneur of the early twentieth century city does not only go 'botanizing on the asphalt' [11] but has been altered a hybrid flaneur of the twenty-first century city who also practices a 'botanizing on the urban data' [12].

The city and the Internet seem to have commonalities in the way they are experienced by the moving subject or the online navigator-user. Both the city and the Internet can be physical or virtual platforms of an atomized behavior/use or a fruitful interaction. What is more, both the city and Internet can consist of vast and complex highways of traffic or information exchange, and offer different levels and intensities of stimulation. If their structure can be suggested as a vague cloud of social or web connections characterized by real or virtual anonymity, then a gamma of potential distractions has to be also taken into consideration. However, mobile geospatial technologies of everyday life have impacted on the way pedestrians experience the city – resulting on an elimination of "getting lost". The change on the experience of the city due to such geo-locative technologies resembles to what Benjamin also saw on the decline of flanerie during the Haussmannization of Paris. The possibility of getting lost entails an avoidance of directions; smart phone digital maps as well as the consideration of possible public space constraints (CCTV, semi-privatized spaces) [13]. Thus, it is very likely for the urban walker to face a level of difficulty while trying to let him/herself be exposed to a randomness of urban stimuli.

If we pass from the physical landscape of the city to the virtual landscape of the Internet, we arrive at the central questions proposed by this paper. Can someone break the rules of online information searching in order to make his/her navigation more spontaneous? Also, can the online navigator (user) trespass the engine's suggestions, which function as informational distractions?

Lev Manovich uses the same metaphor of navigation to present links between physical and virtual space as well as highlighting correlations between the

flaneur and an online 'data cowboy' [14]. Indeed the practice of walking in the city and the encounter with a gamma of stimuli and situations may often resemble an online navigation through an informational landscape. Such navigation can be defined through a rhythmical relationship (e.g. number of clicks, right click to edit a found result). Elias argues that an equivalent approach of psychogeographical dérive in the virtual space of the Internet could be net.art, which 'aimed at defamiliarising [online] space and reconnecting it to human desire' [15]. Net.art works are often produced and presented online – mostly based on multimedia and data from other Internet materials. The viewer accesses them through the screen and the use of the mouse. Such works reveal traces of online psychogeography, such as when cyber-artists make use of code to undermine authoritarian codification systems that pertain the Internet.

In the current online environment, which is characterized by authoritarian informational frameworks, recommendations and "data messiahs", the user's choice for personal and new informational paths seems restricted. The latter calls for an online dérive tactic, which could form a potential of digital resistance against such online authoritarian systems. In other words, the randomness of the encounter that Situationists International sought to achieve through dérive seems to be a significant starting point for an online dérive. As while walking in the city through buildings and street names, the online dérive seems to be deployed through online addresses and hyperlinks. The random encounter is defined by clicks and links, where the starting point (link) is what the user enters to initiate an online wandering. Departing from the metaphors of walking in the city and navigating the Internet, randomness constitutes a potential platform for such online dérive. However, how exactly can an online dérive be constructed through arts and computational design methods?

The randomness: deconstructing the digital grid

In her book *How We Became Post human: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics* Katherine Hayles discusses how we must begin to move beyond defining our society in terms of either absence or presence and must instead explore the new kinds of relationships formed between randomness and pattern, where randomness is

seen as a productive space and not merely as determined by the absence of pattern. For example, randomness within genetics causes mutations, which may aid the continuing survival of a species [16]. In contrast to Hayles argument, currently the Internet users tend to view randomness, as a failure in the code. Contemporary society has developed methods for controlling and limiting our Internet exploration by making the system more efficient. This efficiency derives not only from technological developments but also the financial drive of corporations to manipulate the user. Within this paper navigation should be seen instead, as the vehicle to explore how acts of randomness, can manifest as a productive methodology within computational arts.

The idea of using patterns as a means to navigate data stems from Vannevar Bush's writings which have undoubtedly had a profound impact on the way we research through data today. His concept of the memex—a combination of "memory" and "index"—has inspired the way that we currently use Internet navigation. This was first mentioned within his seminal paper *As We May Think* (1945), which discusses and predicts how scientists may use and connect technologically to a vast array of archives in order to gain a better overview of an ever-complicating world of research. However, despite Bush's technophilia, in 1945 he was already critical of the progression of science and its inability to provide scientists with better tools for handling the massive external records of data they were creating. In his paper he laments: "so much for the manipulation of ideas and their insertion into the record. Thus far we seem to be worse off than before - for we can enormously extend the record; yet even in its present bulk we can hardly consult it" [17]. This type of thinking has influenced the field of computing to prioritise the creation of better algorithms (patterns) as opposed to considering the possibilities of serendipitous discovery and randomness.

In order to understand these patterns in relation to the digital grid, we can return briefly to the example of the city and compare the fixed grid system of New York to that of London, which, due to the historical development of the city, has a more organic and permeable structure. This structure is not only enhanced by the materials it is been made from, the name, size and form of the street, but is also connected to the historical, cul-

tural and economical data of the city, that prompts you to further investigate and explore alternative destinations and non-linear routes. As a result of this there is an enhanced possibility of getting lost and finding unexpected outcomes. Further to that emerges the question of whether any aspects of the Internet can be used and fed back into a digital practice of Dérive.

The randomness: exploring practices

"If I have no room nor space for further critical thinking

If I am not questioning the data nor the information shown to me

If I am always given directly what "I really want"

…then am I any different from The Machine?" [18].

To begin to penetrate current practices around information retrieval we must look into the most common method of Internet navigation: the Search Engines. In its emptiness, the search box on the browser suggests a reaction, which creates the presence of information through pattern. The very name "search engine" implies that the "search" actually happens through the machine and you are merely the catalyst of its action. The word "search" also implies an active approach to navigation - in the same way that when you are looking on the bookshelf for a book, what you may find instead is another piece of information that triggers you from a memory, nostalgia or personal cognition. This may capture your attention and lead to new investigation. Through the semantic web particularly through social media, the practice of searching is changing, allowing us to find a balance between the information retrieval techniques of search engines and a tacit exploration of looking for "the" book, as described above. This semantic web approach to the information produced in social media is informed by our choices, for example by the action of selecting people you want to "listen" to, rather than being driven by the machine.

An example of this could be Twitter whereby you expect to discover, depending on who you follow, unexpected information. This information will only be revealed to you through the gaze [19] and your own personal interpretation of what tweets attract your focus and engage your pilgrimage.

~~Database~~ is an exhibition that explores

navigation and memory, in conjunction with opposing words being selected and displayed [20]. In this context your expectations of data navigation are inverted when you click a keyword within a text on the screen and expect to travel through a hypertext to information about that word, but are instead confronted with its antonym on the projector. This alternative response challenges the passive user to become active and to question the relationship between the word on the screen and what is being projected. This questioning leads to a psychological search that moves between personal experience, cultural understanding and memory to form a response. You are then advised to print the text on screen and this time your navigation is the direct cause of the erasure of text, as each of the words you have clicked has been blacked out. This loss of documentation (of the words that most interested you) forces the formation of a memory, of your understanding of the words on screen and the projected antonyms.

Rosa Menkman [21] also discusses the use of loss, through the Glitch or error as opposed to deliberate erasure, as a productive space for artistic practice. She suggests that rather then the Glitch being viewed as a negative or 'failure of the software', this unexpected loss of data allows the randomness of the machine to be exposed which creates unpredictable opportunities for exploration. This breakdown of the grid allows Menkman to create poetic and thoughtful audio-visuals (see for example The Collapse of PAL: http://vimeo.com/12199201), which through crafted video manipulation and sections of narrative, presents philosophical statements about technology and society.

Another example of how technology can be used to break the implicit qualities of the search took place in Delphus under the IP research collaboration programme *"From Real to Virtual"* which exposed the imperfections of the grid for artistic merit. A series of translation performances was created through using Google Translate to translate one English sentence through thirteen different languages and then back to English. The outcome of the experiment was a manuscript of nonsensical content. By amplifying the error through multiple translations, this "performance" taps into the poetics of the text rather than the literal content you expect when you are translating text [22].

Final Thoughts

The aim of this paper has been to briefly discuss the ideas of spatial navigation in relation to the online information in our role as human beings in that practice [23]. Search engines and the Hypertext have created the illusion of having more control over specific data. Digital technologies have created the illusion of having more control of navigation through search engines, the hypertext, GPS technologies, online maps and so on. From our personal physical navigation of the world, to the way that we find and use information, our tolerance of 'getting lost' seemed to have been impacted as we find ourselves getting irritated when the map leads us the wrong way or when we end up with information we had not meant to find.

These practices inform our understanding of the world and our environment. Although it may be more effective and pleasurable to have the "world at our fingertips" we must critically question what it is we want and who we will become if we always find immediately what we seek, as it is the human aversion to being "out of control" that drives and arouses these innovations. This is not a critique of technology per se, but a critical questioning of our understanding and role as active users, as opposed to passive consumers of information, including the way we build layers of information through cognition that enhance rather then diminish our imagination. This paper proposes that one way of actively stimulating our imagination is through the unexpected use of the glitch, error and getting lost.

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