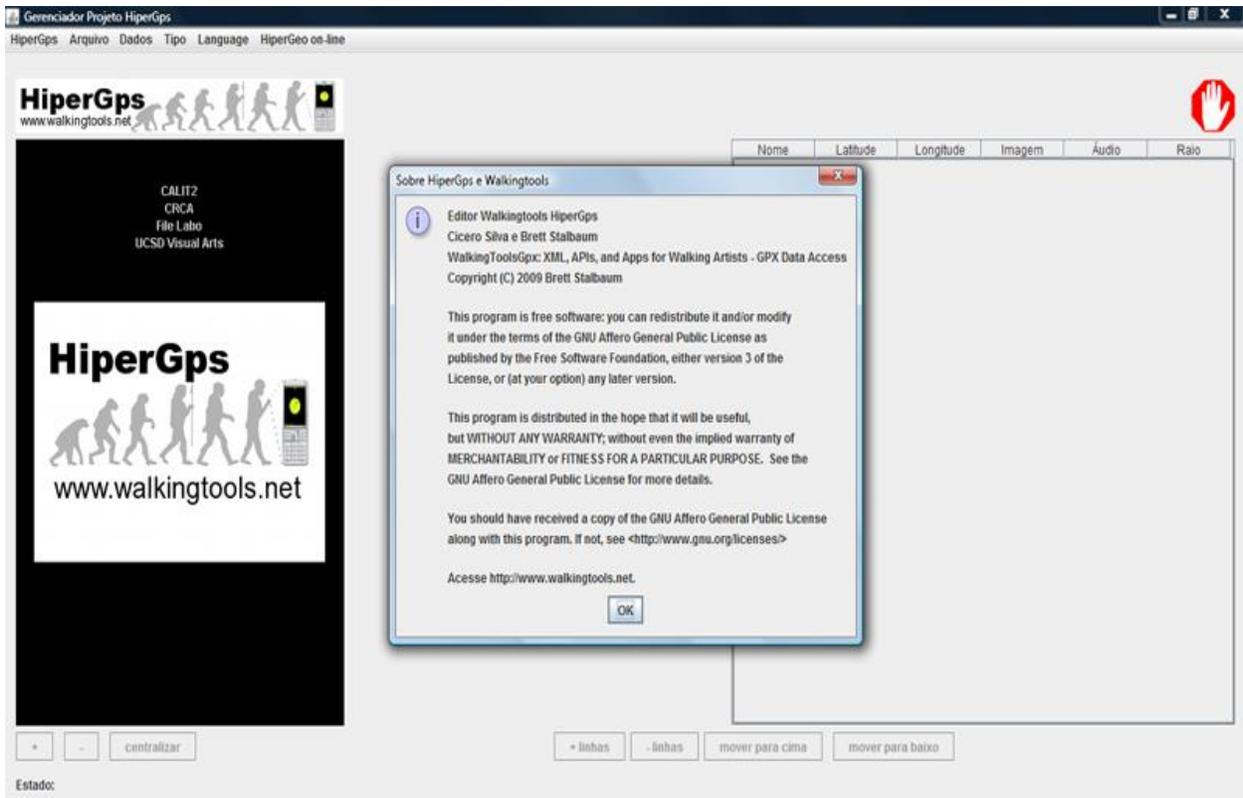


WALKINGTOOLS CONCEPTS: RETHINKING LOCATIVE MEDIA

Cicero Silva & Brett Stalbaum

Digital location is moving us towards a complex definition of what is locative. The article analyzes the implications of what is forming the structure of the politics of the space and the relation between the physical world and the representations that we have from it since the creation of maps and cartography. The article proposes a relation between content and location based on the subjective experience of the space.



Walkingtools project by Brett Stalbaum and Cicero Inacio da Silva.

Wikipedia may be unreliable, nonauthoritative, and suffer systemic "hive mind" bias across a large number of topics, but for the purpose of capturing the mimetic zeitgeist of emerging discipline areas, its hivey, collaborative nature comes as close to producing reliability as we could hope for. This is further verified by the world's leading ontologist: the google internet search engine currently lists that wikipedia page as the number one hit for "locative media". Thus, it is safe to assume that the following definition is at authoritative in a collective sense:

"Locative Media are media of communication bound to a location. They are digital media applied to real places and thus triggering real social interactions." (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Locative_media)

This we will refer to as the *normalized authoritative* definition of locative media. Is this the limit of locative media, a meme that emerged only in the past ten years, somewhere in the confluence of ubiquitous computing and the significant influence of Marc Tutters and Karlis Kalnins? We will argue here that it is not, claiming that the normalized authoritative definition is so narrow that that the conceptual blind spots are necessarily numerous. We speculate that exciting new territory and interesting unexplored possibilities exist, and will propose an agenda that seeks to move beyond the influential and important early phases of this new media. In the process, we will first parse some bits of the genealogy of the current definition, including examining some interesting rear garde polemics surrounding it. Following that, we will look at narrative practice, examining its intersections with the normalized authoritative definition and examining some alternative practices. To that we will add some other speculative thoughts based on inspiration and frameworks drawn from the history, theory, and practice of conceptual art. In no place in this essay will we pretend to offer a comprehensive solution. Our goal is merely to define the problem and imply that there is work left to be done.

But before exploring these issues, let's wave the butterfly net and see what memes we can pull out of the air. Mapping and map hacking. Spatially tagged hypermedia and geo-annotation. Location aware story telling. Web 2.0 mashups using the Google Maps API. Neogeography. Google Earth competing with ArcGIS, spreading the software metaphor of geographic data layers from the professional realm into the consumer realm. Cast in virtual tourism, turn-by-turn in-dash GPS systems, and the waypoint merging with the vacation photo in the form of geotagging on websites like Flickr. Or even less exciting, consider the banal dream of wireless marketing: a consumer's mobile phone, fully aware of the user's geographic coordinates, chirps and delivers an electronic coupon for a nearby coffee shop, into which they stroll like a Pavlovian dog salivating a conditioned response to steamed milk. Certainly this is one of the most quotidian platitudes of recent ecommerce, but its activist other is also worth calling out. The latter stems from the cultural imagination of the sociologically engaged artist: the possibility of yet another technology or platform such as the Sony Portapak, community access television, the personal computer, and Webs 1.0 and 2.0 that will inevitably revolutionize the social as the means of production and distribution become more ever more democratically distributed. And of course, the artist imagines themselves standing there, producing their own narrative, a different content for the same systematic assumptions, hoping to stimulate a different interaction that the social engagement involved in purchasing a cup of coffee. Indeed, now 43 years since Nam June Paik supposedly used an early Portapak to videotape the Pope's visit to New York, we can see the art/activist ideological trope playing out in much the same way: the democratization of the content expressed through use of the medium allows potentially socially transformative media content to challenge dominant commercial content, thereby "[T]riggering real social interactions" in competition with the social interactions already taking place in a consumer economy. These many tropes - mapping, geoannotation, geolocative services, and the implications of locative media for artistic agency within the domain of the social - can be said to explain how we so rapidly came to a relatively calcified understanding the new location aware media.

The activist trope may be a regularly occurring one in the artworld. Lev Manovich points to concerns with new technology's role in promoting "better democracy" as one of the ideological tropes typically accompanying the emergence of any new medium. We have our radio stations, they have theirs. We have our television stations, they have theirs. We have our web sites, they have theirs. Now we have our

own location aware media, and we hope to be as successful as the socially transformative agents of critical opposition who came before us.

Whether or not an optimism regarding the utopian or democratic potentialities of a new technology (or in this case, a new configuration of existing technologies) is a recurring trope (flowing from photography through Web2.0), concern with autonomy and opposition are *prima facie* apparent in the collective classification of locative media by contemporary artists and scholars. The social is the sign underlying its initial conception, with artists trying to be the balance against locative media's inverse revolutionary influences: dependence and compliance in a consumer culture. For example locative media wikipedia entry discusses a text by Ben Russell from 2004 in which he finely parses many of the social claims that can be made on behalf of the new area of practice, including public participation in the development and use of new technologies, the emergence of communities of interest, and the political issues of surveillance and control. In 2005 Galloway and Ward clearly enumerate the many political issues inherent in locative media: "Where does the technology originate? How is the project funded? Who gets to use these technologies to create cultural 'content' or artefacts? Who gets to set the rules of engagement? What are the power relations at play? What shape can resistance take?" In his essay "Locative Dystopia 2" Drew Hemment speculates a subtle and sophisticated answer to such questions, finding that "Locative Media's political moment might not be despite its complicity in mechanisms of domination but because of it, residing in the acceptance of the paradox and occupying the ambiguous space it creates, creating a site of resistance by working from the inside." Similar obsessions are clearly stated by most commentators, and in most artist project descriptions. But what is less examined is that by adopting a position of opposition, the artists enter a binary argument and adopt the very assumption that locative media technology is a communications technology. For artists the goals are different than the marketers: to be used in expository artistic expression and critical or sociological pedagogy seeking to mediate behavior as opposed to expository marketing and capitalist manipulation of the consumer. But locative media is too rarely seen as anything beyond this, for example as a medium with specific formal qualities that are poorly understood and in need of formal exploration.

Interestingly, the second google hit for locative media is an essay by one of the aforementioned founders of locative media, Marc Tuters. At first glance, the essay would seem to propose getting beyond current conceptions of locative media, inasmuch as its title is "Beyond Locative Media". But in fact, "Beyond Locative Media" is a defense against a rear garde action by prominent critics such as Coco Fusco, Jordan Crandall, Brain Holmes and Geert Lovink, who variously criticize the cartesian foundations of the medium itself, or the "decorative" artworks that function more like trade-show demos, or the unavoidable fact that like the internet, the Global Positioning System is a U.S. military technology with an irrevocable imperialist taint. These are all in fact completely reasonable (if sometimes predictable) critiques that locative media artists must answer. Tuters graciously accepts this, but responds via Frederic Jameson and Gilles Deleuze that artists must maintain an engagement with the media in order to have any hope of situating the contemporary subject in the context created by new technology, and to be in position to develop tools of resistance. Putting aside whether this is actually a direct response to any the specific critiques offered, we want to call attention to how the political trope simply rises again in Tuter's response to the political criticism of locative media as a political medium. Tuter's makes essentially Habermasian claims about the ability of locative media to communicate rational knowledge in the public sphere. Ester Polak's MILK project is highlighted in support of this, an evocative multimedia and geographic mapping of the path of milk en route from cow to cornflakes. In other words, the political moment of locative media is to be found in visualizations made possible by the "Internet of Things", thereby expanding the public's understanding (and presumably political response) of the structure and

distribution of material wealth. In other words, it is the locative variant of the profound cultural influence of documentary cinema on recent world history, or less sarcastically positively modeled on Donald Kuspit's severe critique of "Gallery Leftism" in which the artist calculates "to occupy a certain position, in the artworld... having a socio-political effect in the world".

What amazes us is the locative whirligig of assumption of political efficacy or some related role generally. Not that we consider this desire negatively in any way, on the contrary we sometimes tilt at the same windmill. Nor that we wish to actually analyze the actual political efficacy of any media. But we are concerned over the continual overreaching claims by artists that their work is a strong mediator of political opinions through the mechanism of the viewer consuming the artist's representations. The filmmaker Michael Moore may have provided the most notable recent example of what we are trying to get at here, in that his great films have not been politically transformative, functioning instead to reinforce already polarized points of view. The number of people who think that *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) is an anti-gun film is simply astounding! Well known political artist/prankster who sometimes goes by the name Mike Bonanno recently recounted a story from the Yes Men's "Yes Bush Can" bus tour in 2004 in which they performed "identity correction" by presenting themselves as members of the Bush Campaign team, complete with a campaign bus! At one stop, while giving one of their absurdly over the top pro-bush speeches, Mike noticed that almost everyone listening to them were either angry detractors or enthusiastic supporters. One man, a European, was able to read them for the politically provocative pranksters that they are, which in the final analysis was worrying to "Mike". Certainly there are at least contemporary questions about art's ability to communicate, let alone persuade.

Anti mapping

How are we to parse these? We may need to peer back a bit further, to seek a model that reveals a productive distinction that might extend the range and depth of locative media practices, breaking it from some of its present stasis.

A very similar pattern can be observed in the historical development "net art" practices back in the Web 1.0 1990's, a recognized period in computer art history that the present author was part of. The first wave of 1990's net art projects were interested in Web 1.0's abilities to represent information, identity, narrative, and function as a distribution channel for art practices focusing on online communication as the mechanism of individual creative expression and collective social engagement. The web was a communications channel for artists with a message and they used the media exactly as it was designed to be used. But it was not long before a smaller group of artists, mostly based in Europe, began to resist the more obvious approaches to and applications of the world wide web, questioning the formal aspects of underlying medium itself, treating the internet conceptually, hacking it, breaking it, and making it do things it was never intended to do.

Examples seem necessary at this point. We might point to artists like Judy Malloy, Abbe Don, Mark America and others associated in one way or another with digital story telling or hypertext story telling in the late 1980's and throughout the nineties. Following in a well laid tradition of hypermedia development instigated by Ted Nelson in the 1960s and 70s, these artists created stories and poetry delivered by emerging hypertext technologies that would finally crystalize in hypertext transfer protocol. In every sense, these accomplishments

For many of these artists, the web was a place to perform and to forge spaces of temporary autonomy, not a place to gaze at glowing messages or produce glowing messages to gaze at. And when we think of today's geospatial web in this context, we can see that notions more closely mapping to the former social applications of communications and representation abound, while notions of exploring the conceptual depth and unseen potentialities of the medium are rarer. We might define the two approaches as art *using neogeography and locative media* and art *of neogeography and locative media*.

There is a poorly understood relationship between data and location is obscured by our narcissism, our desire to see ourselves reflected in the high tech mirror. This is why we map. Many of the alternatives for locative can be revealed in widely misunderstood relationships between the virtual and the real. We can say that maps doesn't reveal us something, they command our view. The next step maybe is analyze why Google has decided on May of 2008 change his product policy from "Google and Maps" to "Google on Maps", showing us that they are aware of this turning point related to the power of the representation and the control of the spaces by virtual means, i.e. by the old but still valid concept of "map".

The issues are complex, and in the process of teasing the relationships we will also examine the currently accepted definition of "locative media" that seeks an escape into the the political by stimulating social interaction. What we need now is speculate routes of escape.

It is not the engagement with maps that is interesting, it is engaging with place.