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GOING IN A DIFFERENT DIRECTION: CRITICAL ARTS-BASED APPROACHES TO GOOGLE MAPS

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Introduction

These days, wayfinding is often associated with ‘asking’ Google Maps to locate where something is and how to get there. Google Maps is among the most popular applications for mobile devices with over 1 billion people putting it to work every month. Despite this frequency, there is little information available on how Google Maps is used; or, as Verge writer Andrew J. Hawkins confesses (2017), “we just need the directions, the right subway route, or the name of that good sushi place.” What is happening in these moments of everyday wayfinding and place-making? What on-the-ground relationships to space are produced in these orientations towards Big Tech’s mobile maps? The following paper builds on the theoretical contributions of critical digital mapping research (Barns, 2020; Kwan, 2016; Farman, 2014; Mattern, 2017; McQuire, 2016) through an arts-based (Loveless, 2019; Leavy, 2015) exploration of contemporary wayfinding practices. I consider the conditions of orientation (Ahmed, 2006) and the operationalization of location awareness (McQuire, 2016) mediated through the use of Google Maps.

Methods

To focus on everyday wayfinding, I designed a creative intervention into street-level practices of getting from A to B. In the streets of Toronto (*Tkaronto*), New York (*Manahatta*), Amsterdam, and London, I approached passers-by and asked for directions, with the follow up request that the informant draw their directions for me, using the paper and pen I provided. I based the process off a conceptual art project from the early 1960s by artist, Stanley Brouwn. In his work, *This Way Brouwn* (1964), Brouwn walked the streets of Amsterdam and asked passers-by for directions, then prompted the helpful strangers to draw out their instructions on the paper he provided. Brouwn’s piece is a foundational conceptual artwork that brings together performance, drawing, and urban-intervention.

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In reactivating Brouwn's work, the directions I asked for were to and from a group of pre-set locations in these cities. These encounters framed moments of spontaneous spatial sense-making and on-the-spot navigation, resulting in 220 drawings that were ad-hoc in their rendering.

Using visual grounded theory (Konecki, 2011) and Situational Analysis (Clarke, 2005), I looked at relations that run across and between the environment, the technology, and the social registers of the wayfinding moment. I then mapped this empirical research onto a discourse analysis of Google's own discursive framing of Google Maps evidenced through its application, its web presence, and its developer conference, I/O. I looked at street-level wayfinding in the context of this rhetoric through the lens of Sara Ahmed's (2006) theorizing on orientation as actions made in relation to power.

Findings and Contributions

When I asked for directions, Google Maps was overwhelmingly the most used digital map. Informants would turn to Google Maps to "show" me or "make sure they have it right" when I asked them to draw. It was also used after participants noted they were unfamiliar with the area but were able to give directions based on their access to Google Maps, pointing to a spatial command or even a claim to space that may otherwise have been unknown. In some cases, participants would draw directions based from the Google Maps visual representation of space or copy its text-based directions. In other encounters, I would scribe for them based on their elicitation of the Google Maps directions.

As the city was made legible in these moments, I noted how informants were locating themselves in techno-imaginaries of Google Maps evident through phrases like: "thank goodness for Google" or "I just put on Google Maps and I go" or "It's my favourite app because I'm obsessed with finding the best way." These utterances frame Google Maps as a dependable resource paralleling the Google Maps claim that it "helps people as they move around the world" by way of "bringing our understandings to our users" (Google Developers, 2017).

Turning to Google Maps' discursive maneuvers, there is a repeated focus on the imperatives to "discover" and "explore" with emphasis placed on acts of personalization by way of "your world" and "your plans." Explore is a means of consumption framed by locating sites to eat and shop. Navigation is a means to find the 'best route' or the fastest way, avoiding traffic, as well as avoiding other impediments to speed (read 'speed traps'). Google Maps' discursive maneuvers promote an exploratory logic through frames of reliability and seamlessness, granting purchase on place through map access. When everyday uses of the digital map move beyond a navigational tool towards an instrument of place-making, it is important to identify how the prototypical Google Maps 'user' is itself an apparatus of the Google Maps spatial imaginary in which urban experiences can be (and are naturalized to be) optimized and managed. These encounters reveal responsive means of wayfinding that are more than acts of compliance (Barns, 2020) but also demonstrations of selective and iterative engagements with mediated environments. But what preconditions do these orientations set and what is erased in the process?

The creative intervention cuts through the everyday and points to the ways digital mobile tools are put to work and how they parallel, intersect, and diverge from other forms of a city's ambient intelligences. The paper presents a case study of a creative approach to critical internet research used to better assess dominant discourses of wayfinding and place-making and how these seep into mundane practices of getting from A to B.

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