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### **Practicing the Generic (City)** Reconfiguring Life through Digital Media

The key issue to examine with locative media and pervasive games is that many of these new, mediated experiences refer to and appropriate space while divorcing it from its meaning, history, and significance.  
(Flanagan 2007; 5)

All Generic Cities issue from the tabula rasa; if there was nothing, now they are there; if there was something, they have replaced it. They must, otherwise they would be historic.  
(Koolhaas 1995; 1253)

Discussing locative media projects Flanagan (2007) argues that digital urban games often demonstrate a striking lack of reflection on the particular urban space they are designed for. Many claim to be psychogeographic, but hardly any of them actually are, Flanagan argues, as they neglect the historical and political aspects that were essential to the Situationists' investigations. With the Situationists and Lefebvre as analytical tool, she thus presents a critique of those games where the game 'engine' and not the context itself defines the game play. Concluding that most games understand the urban landscape simply as an advanced game board where the actual location is only superficially explored, Flanagan calls for designers to understand that locative media projects "must begin to reflect the contested nature of the lived reality of such spaces" (Flanagan 2007; 9).

#### **Cities of 'character'?**

But what kind of spaces are we talking about? We could understand these locations in light of the cities (primarily Paris) that the Situationists worked

with: large, 'traditional' European cities imbued with many layers of history. However, if we follow Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas, those cities have 'disappeared', partly through the attempts of conserving them. In his monumental book "S, M, L, XL" Koolhaas introduced the idea of the Generic City describing how every modern metropolis is essentially a slightly reconfigured clone of any other urban area. He finds the search for historic identity meaningless as the "perpetual quest for 'character,' grinds successful identities down to meaningless dust" (Koolhaas 1995; 1248). What most would bemoan, Koolhaas applauds, because out of this identity stripping rises the generic "an endless repetition of the same simple structural module." (Koolhaas 1995; 1251) Or, to return to Flanagan's vocabulary, out of this rises the city as a game board on which anything can happen.

With respect to locative media, how do we then navigate between the positions laid out by Flanagan and Koolhaas? Can digital media work with both the generic and the particular qualities of a location? Koolhaas' might offer a first step of resolving this himself as Prouty notes that the more you invest, the more particular the generic becomes, even if it is always generic on some level and even if this experience is always transient:

the generic city describes a way of seeing as much as it describes a set of objects [...] Live in one place long enough and subtle but distinct differences start to emerge [...] A generic city is the humid boomtown you visit on business. It's a transient space that can't be fully inhabited. (Prouty 2009; 7)

### **Inhabiting and reconfiguring generic locations**

Through a sketchy analysis of Dutch media artist Esther Polak's *NomadicMILK* (2008), let's look at how locative media can reconfigure (the experience of) a location from generic to particular and vice versa, even if only temporarily. Using GPS equipment and a robot that 'draws' with sand on the ground, *NomadicMILK* visualizes milk transports and herdsmen's migration routes in Nigeria as sand tracks, that show the 'shared workspace' of drivers and herdsmen.

The spatial understanding of herdsmen and truck drivers obviously differs. With Prouty we might say that while the rural landscape is generic to the truck drivers, its particularity causes herdsmen to always adapt their migration patterns. The sand robot's drawing is always scaled to its maximum range (appr. 12 m), resulting in no visual difference between a 3 km and a 3,000 km route, and this clearly plays with the generic and the particular.

Most compelling, though, is the drawing's reflection of the temporality of both the particular and the generic. As a material witness to the temporal, the sand drawing is subject to immediate erasure. Both figuratively and concretely speaking, the sand tracks can never leave a lasting impression on a particular level, although they might leave a generic impression of routes and scales as such. The sand-on-sand representation show how the generic can be reconfigured through particular acts of movement, but also how these movements have limited capacity for showing or creating lasting

(or historic to use a term from the Situationists' psychogeographic vocabulary) layers of understanding. Using this particular material, Polak's project thus shows that there is no essence, only fractals "endless repetition[s] of the same simple structural module" (Koolhaas 1995; 1251). But also fractals reveal interesting information.

#### **References**

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- Koolhaas, Rem (1995) *Small, Medium, Large, Extra-Large*, New York: Monacelli.
- Polak, Esther (2008) *NomadicMILK*, <http://nomadicmilk.net>
- Prouty, Richard (2009) 'Buying Generic: The Generic City in Dubai.' *Static* 8, 1-8.