

Datalogging the Landscape

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The path is an extension of walking [...] Thus the walking body can be traced in the places it has made: paths, parks, and sidewalks are traces of the acting out of imagination and desire. (Solnit 2006: 29)

The natural world allows us to leave our mark through the footsteps we make in the sand, and through the wearing of the turf as we create short cuts to our destinations. It is these individual, unique distinctions that track our movement, yet due to natural world phenomena we may not see or experience these exact same routes again. The footsteps are washed away and the desire line once created by a shortcut may become overgrown as a new, quicker route takes its place.

GPS datalogging devices now enable us to track our routes through space. A walk across the worldly landscape can now be saved into the digital landscape, a world of multiple pixels and in many instances two-dimensional flat plains. De Certeau writes of the 'walker' who experiences the routes through the city, in contrast to the 'voyeur' who views the city's design from the rooftops above (de Certeau 1984: 92). Now, both the walker and voyeur are in many ways coexisting simultaneously through these technologies. Providing these two instances ask the question of how our experiences of walking and wandering across the landscape differ from the representations provided by the mapped view. The act of wandering combined with this form of emergent map creation allows for both practices to be undertaken seamlessly, with the digital map growing with every physical step. These maps differ those found within the pages of books, or even those paths that can be seen on already digitally mapped satellite views. These maps are personal to our own journeys. Although they can be shared, each route can also remain solely the property of its creator, as they wander away from the constructed pavements, sidewalks, roads and trails in the search of their own



newly defined routes. Geotagging photos and collecting the data on digital maps to share with others provides a window to some of these experiences, enabling us to create what Tuan defines as 'landmarks' (Tuan 1977: 71). Instead of more traditional map markers such as churches, windmills and railway stations, the photographer and walker of the path determine these new user-generated landmarks. The landmarks although two-dimensional photographs depict three-dimensional worlds, adding an extra layer to the map, far removed from the iconic representations of top-down simplified objects. These maps can also become annotated with wiki comments and videos extending the once worn path further either during or after the walk. Each datalogged route can be annotated with the walker's own narrative.

The datalogger can capture the route made by our footprints and draw the lines in-between, whilst the narrative of the journey is still determined by the walker in their pictorial representations. The images provide an idea of a landscape through the eyes of the walker, as although the GPS fixes the photograph to a point on the map, the actual position in terms of where the walker was facing is still only held in the moment the photograph was taken and is left as a memory through a displayed image. In the absence of taking any photographs on the route, we can view other people's imagery taken along the same route. However these images are part of the other walker's narrative and experience. The same natural, evolving landscape will hold subtle differences each time it is walked. The routes captured may be personal to the walked experience. Therefore the imagery often only means something to the person that took it, such as the pattern on a tree trunk, which may not be found as easily by other walkers. The natural landscape

also continues to grow and evolve, therefore the digital snapshot needs to be constantly updated to expand with its ephemeral nature.

It can be seen that these smaller, individual, experiences are yet to exist on 'traditional' maps, with the walker acting as explorer in these instances. The digital map provides a contrast to the already constructed worldly path always found in amongst the forest canopy. This new data is now being mapped permanently for the user as their movements are tracked with their every step. New digital paths are created, and can be viewed without the need for physical worldly path to be constantly worn away in order for the route's presence to be remembered. This raises the issue of how are we now, through digital technologies, re-mapping the landscape with this collected data. This paper examines our relationships with the new maps we create in relation to the real world walking experienced whilst constructing them and how these growing technologies are possibly reworking our understanding of these re-generated routes, trails and places.

References

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