Playful Identities

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10. Digital cartographies as playful practices

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Where was I?

My neighbor recently looked up a Google Street View image of his tattoo parlor in Amsterdam. He noticed that his bicycle was parked in front of his shop, so he gathered that the specially equipped cars that made the panoramic photographs were traversing the city on one of his working days. Becoming intrigued he returned to the map and looked up the school of his children, whom he always picks up after school on his non-working days. On the Google Street View image a crowd of parents were gathering outside the school building. So he figured that the picture must have been shot at the end of the school day. His bicycle was nowhere to be seen and therefore his presumption that the cars drove through the city on one of his working days must have been right. He then looked up his home address on the map and saw that his car was not parked in front of the building. Had his wife gone somewhere that day? On the square in front of the house he noticed a huge billboard with posters for the European elections. So now he knew that the Google cars must have been driving around Amsterdam around June 2009.

The story that my neighbor told me provides a good illustration of what I want to discuss in this chapter. What my neighbor was doing here was constructing a spatial story through the use of digital maps. He actually tried to reconstruct two spatial stories at once: that of his own movements (and of his wife and children) and that of the movement of the Google cars. That his stories may hinge on the arguably wrong presumption that the Google Maps Street View cars covered Amsterdam in one single day is of less importance here. More important is that he became intrigued with the possibilities of digital cartographical technologies to construct spatial stories, a term cultural philosopher Michel de Certeau coined to describe how people understand their everyday whereabouts by weaving spatial narratives (1984, 122-35). However, my neighbor didn't just create any spatial story, but a story about the whereabouts of himself and his family. So his endeavors to create a spatial story were closely bound to his (social) identity. He actually asked himself the question where am I
instead of *who am I*. Moreover he described the whole project as something he did for fun, as a playful activity that was worthwhile sharing in a light conversation.

This chapter is about the triad relation between digital mapping practices, spatial stories, and playful identities that can be distilled from my neighbor’s story. Contrary to what media scholars have argued before about new media and contemporary cultures (Augé 2008; Eberle 2004; Kunstler 1994; Kupfer 2007; Meyrowitz 1985), digital mapping practices have actually brought us new senses of place and a strong urge to locate ourselves and to come to terms with our identities through story-like constructions of our whereabouts. Central to my argument is the notion that digital cartographies allow a greater degree of two-way interaction between map and user than analogue maps (cf. November et al. 2010). Digital map users are not just reading maps, but are also to a far greater extent constantly influencing the shape and look of the map itself. At home, at work, or while traveling: maps have become more personal, transforming while we navigate with and through them. Digital maps have thus altered our conception of maps as “objectified” representations of space which have been a touchstone for centuries (de Certeau 1984; Anderson 1991; Crampton 2002; Harley 1989; Wood 2003). Instead digital maps have become more personal sources for constructing stories of one’s whereabouts (Lammes 2008).

As this book illustrates, contemporary culture is also becoming increasingly ludic. Although play has always been a key element of many cultural practices, since the 1960s a tendency can be discerned in which daily cultural practices have become far more imbued with play. Some have called this an infantilization (Bauman 2007) and others a gamification (McGonigal 2011) of postcapitalist culture (Dibbel 2006). In this book we refer to it as the “ludification of culture” (cf. Raessens 2006; 2014). Pivotal to this change is that playing has become less separate from other, more serious, daily activities. These shifts in our experience of play and cartography are synergized in a myriad of playful mapping practices that people currently engage with. Whether it is with games, social networks, fantasy maps on the Internet, locative artworks, or location-based augmented reality applications, all these experiences ask users to actively play with maps.

The advent of digital maps and a simultaneous ludification of culture has thus opened up new possibilities for maps to function as “play equipment” that allow users to engage in what play-theorist Brian Sutton-Smith has called “informal social play” and “performance play” (1997, 4-5). Perhaps they are even an incarnation of what geographer John Kirkland Wright had in mind in 1947 when he called for an open acknowledgment and incorporation
of the emotional and imaginative connection between people, places, and maps (Wright 1947).

**Mobile mapping**

My neighbor was using Google Maps on his desktop computer. So although the two spatial stories he constructed were all about mobility, he made his quest from a more-or-less stationary position. Here I will actually take his story a step further and discuss the playful use of digital maps on smartphones like the iPhone and Android phones. The mobility of the user and technology adds yet another layer to the dynamics between map, spatial story, and playful identity than is prevalent in my neighbor’s account because such phones “house” mapping technologies that enable the user to use maps and locate their own position on the map while being on the move (Lammes 2013).

Smartphones are increasingly becoming prime loci for digital mapping practices. One of the reasons that the use of maps has been so successful on smartphones is of course the mobility of the user and phone. Just as you could take an old paper map with you to check your route, you now have your phone with you, yet with the crucial difference that your whereabouts are now rendered on the map which adapts itself to your mobility and wishes. But besides the sheer convenience of having it all in your pocket, I believe that the fascination with cartographical technologies on phones should also be seen as a counterbalance to the act of mobile phoning itself which is very much about displacement. The availability of location data attaches a sense of physical location to mobile telephony by visualizing your whereabouts on the map.

**Making things visible**

With the emergence of Android phones, the iPhone, and other types of smartphones a myriad of highly popular applications and mash-ups have been developed in which digital maps are used for more purposes than just solely finding your way (Verhoeff 2012). I will discuss two such applications: **Foursquare** and **Layar**. **Foursquare** is a social networking game in which “players” gather points by checking in at various locations they visit. **Layar** is an augmented reality browser that allows users (as the name implies) to put a layer over their direct environment (camera view or map), which shows, for example, local restaurants, houses for sale, people who are on Twitter,
campaigns for music artists\textsuperscript{3} or games that have your own environment as the battleground. As the company describes Layar on its website: “a beautiful fun augmented reality app that shows you the things you can’t see”.

In this catchphrase a feature of Layar is highlighted which actually holds for many digital mapping practices on mobile phones: the possibility of rendering visible locations in your direct vicinity that otherwise would stay obscure or unknown. Locative social networks such as iPling, Plazes, or Citysense, games like Assassin or Google Maps mash-ups (e.g. Panoramia), all share this playful fascination with finding and creating spatial connections that would otherwise not be visible (or be there at all).\textsuperscript{4} Take for example the Layar applications Tweeps Around.\textsuperscript{5} In Twitter it often remains unclear where tweets are sent from, let alone that you can situate them in relation to your own location.\textsuperscript{6} Tweeps Around shows you geo-tagged tweets (e.g. “@P: shopping list on the table”, “having a shower”) of people in your vicinity and enables you to locate in detail where they have been sent from on the linked Google map. Thus your daily life is augmented with a layer of spatial information that otherwise would have been unknown to you.

**Spatial stories**

According to Michel de Certeau, creating spatial stories is a means of coping with and experiencing spatial relations in daily life. As in the above
examples they are a personal exploration of spatial surroundings, performative acts in which the traveler becomes the story-maker. De Certeau claims that spatial stories are the main way in which we make sense of everyday life: they are the essential organizing principle of all human activity (1984, 115). In order to understand how such spatial stories are created, he makes a distinction between space and place. Place refers to the “proper” ideologically informed order and to the way spatial positions are related in objective representations, such as maps. Space relates to how we deal with spatiality in daily life. He gives the example of walking in a city to explain what he means by this. The geometrical configuration of the streets he equates with place, while the act of traversing these streets on foot changes them into space. So, as place is set and univocal, the notion of space has as many meanings as there are walkers (ibid., 117). De Certeau speaks of both terms as constantly influencing each other. He identifies place as having the purpose to create unchanging and lifeless objects. While space, on the other hand, presupposes a subjective goal and implies movement and change. In stories, these two determinations should be understood as reciprocal since an abstract place can become a lively changeable, tangible space and vice versa (ibid., 117-21).

As I have argued elsewhere, digital cartographical interfaces actually upset the distinction between maps as abstract and objectified, and the practice of going somewhere as a personal and subjective experience of space (Lammes 2008). De Certeau’s distinction of map and tour becomes problematic since maps are points of contact that change appearances according to where we wish to go and, as the example of Tweeps Around so clearly demonstrates, what others wish us to see. Indeed, the map and the tour can no longer be easily distinguished. Digital maps are in this respect reminiscent of maps in pre-Renaissance Western cultures when traces of touring were still visible on the map. Yet they also share similarities with certain “gestural and performative” mapping practices in non-Western cultures, such as the aboriginal songlines (Kitchin and Dodge 2007, 337). The main shift is that users of digital maps are no longer mere readers of maps, but have become cartographers on tour.

However, to what extent, and how, users are being invited to make maps through a personal exploration of space depends on the precise digital tools involved. In Layar you can choose which information is superimposed on the map or photographic image of your environment, such as reviews of restaurants near to where you are. Still the question remains how much this is about creating spatial stories. Certain applications, such as Tweeps Around, do trigger curiosity about other people’s spatial stories that may
be woven into a grander spatial story about the user’s movements, similar to what my neighbor did. Others, such as the Rolling Stones application, may prompt you to add landmarks like posters and flyers to your direct environment, thus encouraging you to be more directly involved in the creation of a spatial story. Nevertheless, I would say that most layers are not so much about your own local movements, but more about other people and “things” (buildings, monuments, etc.) that surround you and could prompt you to move in a particular way (e.g., going to see a film). Similar to Google Earth, creating your own spatial story is thus largely determined by the landmarks of others. Furthermore, how you create such stories remains largely out of focus. In this way, Layar may be open to adding personal traces and conduct, such as tweets or reviews, but it is still an old-fashioned map in the sense that it offers a pretext for your personal journey and is not primarily about the subjective journey itself.

So although your own location is always the center point of the chosen radius that you see in Layar, and (to paraphrase Michel de Certeau) personal traces have reappeared on the map, the emphasis is mostly put on “local attractions” that others have put on the map. Needless to say, what is being put on the map is often commercially driven, and thus as much an ideological product as maps are in de Certeau explanation. It actually adheres to a definition of augmented reality in which “real life” is very much defined by (post)capitalist interests. In relation to identity, one can say that Layar changes your socio-spatial identity by offering you playful tools for selecting locations in your vicinity that are considered of social interest to you by others.

Where am I headed?

It is true that social network games like Foursquare (Fig. 2) or – the less competitive – Gowalla also offer you a selection of locales that are not entirely of your own making. Companies make money from localized advertisements and you can earn points if you check in at certain companies. If you, for example, check in three times at an Apple store you earn a so-called Job-Badge which you can trade in and if you check in at enough Starbucks locations “you become the envy of your friends with the Barista Badge”. In this way, you are lured in by commercial companies to consume goods and services. Moreover, reviews of such companies left by players on the Foursquare network often look like advertisements for such companies since the spirit of fun seems to dictate an upbeat display of their daily life. Play,
identity, and branding are thus in close collusion when players are invited to engage in mapping. The map may have become more flexible and personal yet is very much part of a prosumer culture where ideological motivations are still far from vanished (see also Crogan’s chapter in this book).

So (postcapitalist) ideological motivations have not disappeared, although the distinction between map and tour may have become muddled. Yet a crucial difference with Layar is that the emphasis shifts to putting yourself on the map and showing others your spatial movements and whereabouts. While Layar invites you to develop spatial stories, for the most part it does not show them, since such games are far more about showing the creation of your own spatial stories through playing, or cheating, as René Glas writes in this book. Furthermore, they encourage you to share your stories, whether or not fabulated, with other players while others in their turn are triggered to share their stories with you. The central objective is to travel, gather points by visiting places, and share (albeit competitively) your whereabouts with others. Your social identity is actually created by putting yourself on the map for others to measure themselves with and to connect to.

On a typical working day, I always use Foursquare while on my way to work. After a short bike ride, I first check in on my phone at the main railway station in Amsterdam. I open the Foursquare application and choose the option “places” at the bottom of the screen to look at all identified “locales” in the vicinity. Besides the railway station, the list includes shops in the vicinity and platform numbers that can be selected for check-in. By clicking on a place, I can read more detailed information about it (e.g. “great coffee, good service”) or I can open a link to a Google map that pinpoints where I am exactly. I can also add locations and information myself. When I have checked in at the railway station, Foursquare gives me the option to share this information with friends on Facebook and Twitter. It also shows me all other people who have been checking in at the station that morning. The person who has checked in the most in the last two months is identified as the mayor of the railway station. After the train has departed, I usually check in at the next train stop before reaching my destination. During the trip I may get notifications from the Foursquare team about earned badges, such as “Hey there – Congrats! Your check-in to Utrecht Central Station just unlocked Photogenic – You found 3 places with a photo booth!” When I reach the office, I always check in again to see if I have lost my mayorship to one of my colleagues who also plays the game and to see if he has already checked into the premises as well. On my way back I repeat the procedure in the reverse order. When I enter my apartment I conclude my day by checking in there. Since I am the only one in the house who plays the game I remain the unchallenged mayor.
By playing Foursquare I have become far more aware of my routine itiner-ary as I travel to work than I would normally be. I am more conscious of my spatial whereabouts by playfully being encouraged to weave a spatial story with myself as the main protagonist. Furthermore, I am telling my story to others, including the Foursquare team, other Foursquare players, and (if I wish) my friends on Facebook. Conversely, other players can tell me their spatial stories and if these players are friends of mine and we find ourselves in the same place, our stories may merge by for instance having a drink together. So Foursquare makes places (as they are called on the graphic interface) more like spaces: personal and social landmarks that are hybrids of objective mapping and subjective touring. Without doubt Foursquare still depends on conventional mapping techniques in the sense that it uses the classical cartographical representation of a Google map, yet as a player I heavily inscribe this “navigational interface” (Lammes 2011) with layers of my personal “adventures”. As a matter of fact, I can even change the location of a landmark on the map, as René Glas points out in his contribution to this book, or for example I can fabricate an even more successful and exciting story in which I become the mayor of the North Pole. All of which is made visible to others.
In his contribution to this book media anthropologist Michiel de Lange identifies how mobile phone users in Jakarta, Indonesia create their social identity by using their phone as a material item that is put on display for others to see. Having and showing your phone as a material good gives you social prestige and is a playful way to create a social and modern identity. Location-based games like Foursquare – judging by the messages shown on Foursquare’s website which are also rather popular in Jakarta – adds another dimension to the level of material status that comes with mobile phones. Now one’s physical location becomes part of the equation since mobile phone users can tell others where they are and thus create spatial stories as a way of mediating identity. Undoubtedly a spatial account that contains more trendy and prestigious places, more sought-after mayorships, and more signs of hooking up with friends earns you more social prestige than I obtained on my trip to work. As such location-based social network games add a material and locative dimension to smartphones to show and create social identities.

In applications like Google Earth or Layar the emphasis is placed on what others want to promote as important locations to shape your social identity. To refer back to the Layar’s slogan: they mainly show you things that others want you to see and go to. Although this component has not vanished from social network games, here the accent is put on how you make yourself spatially visible and powerful in a social network in order to gain social prestige. What both cases have in common is that as applications they open up possibilities for users/players to employ the visualization of locations to shape their identities. As has been shown to us throughout this book, there are indeed fine examples of the ludification of our culture that can demonstrate how digital technologies open spaces for shaping and displaying our spatial identities.

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Notes

1. Discussions about digital media used to frequently focus on how new media, such as the Internet, generated new virtual experiences of space
that were distant from everyday material realities (Fuller 2005). In relation to space, scholars even argued that new media deprived us of a sense of place. Through their global and ubiquitous use and representations they would create “geographies of nowhere” instead (Augé 2008; Eberle 2004; Kunstler 1994; Kupfer 2007; Meyrowitz 1985). Lately a “material turn” can be discerned in which the conception of new media as immaterial, global, and placeless is contested as being naïve. It has recently become more common to assert that digital media re-mediate existing spaces (Bolter and Grusin 1999), that they are site-specific (McCarthy 2001), local as well as global (Appuradai 1996; Bakardjieva 2005; Lammes et al. 2009; Poster 2004; Schwartz 2006), and that virtuality is not opposed to material or physical practices (Fuller 2005; Hayles 2002; Kalaga 2003; Lievrouw and Livingstone 2002; Nunes 2006; Poster 2004; Shield 2003).

2. Satnav companies like TomTom are losing a lot of profit due to the popularity of these mapping applications because people are turning to these other devices or apps on their phones instead. See, for example: “TomTom vestigt hoop op autofabrikanten” [TomTom puts its hope in automobile manufacturers], NRC Handelsblad, July 21, 2010.

3. In 2010, the Rolling Stones created a layer that allowed fans to “fly-post their streets, homes or offices with virtual interactive posters of the rock icons” http://site.layar.com/company/blog/layer-of-the-week-rolling-stones/.


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