

Chapter 83

Which Way Is Up? How Locative Media May Enhance Sense of Place

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ABSTRACT

Despite the growing prominence of locative media, its potential influence on our relationships to our places has not been well understood. Based on previous studies, this paper argues that locative media can affect our spatial relationships in various ways and thereby improve our sense of place. To understand how this can be accomplished it is important to examine the features and affordances of the medium along with user practices and outcomes in relation to place. A brief history of locative media is offered to demonstrate a progression from an early focus on wayfinding to current applications that offer a variety of place-related experiences. Subsequent sections outline four qualities about locative media that combine to differentiate it from other media in regards to place, which are its interactivity, reach, mobility, and vocality. The possible user outcomes of social navigation, autobiographical insideness, defamiliarization and refamiliarization, and spatial interaction are examined as ways in which locative media can enhance sense of place.

INTRODUCTION

The growing sophistication and merging of mobile computing, Internet, and positioning technologies is creating new ways to represent and interact with our spaces. The advent of open-access geographic data and mapping software, combined with distributed access to the Internet, has enabled more people to create and share their own place-related information and interpretations. Through digital tools such as geographic information systems, digital photography, and online open-source maps, people are increasingly able to add locations or descriptive data to maps as well as share georeferenced narratives and spatial representations. By identifying a user's physical location, locative media applications and location based services (henceforth grouped together under the former term) can then deliver content relevant to the user's location. Through such features as wayfinding, social networking, commentary,

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photography, place curation, and mapping, locative media features have become popular with mobile device users. Statistics indicate that 19% of mobile device owners worldwide are using a locative application and 62% aspire to use one (TNS, 2012).

This emerging technology has recently sparked academic literature on the role such technology may have to our spatial relationships. Having a relationship to the places we encounter is considered to be a foundational human experience and need (Heidegger, 1996; Relph, 1976). The meanings, memories, associations, or feelings a person ascribes to a specific location comprise a *sense of place*. Sense of place arises out of the interplay between the physical world, social and cultural practices, and an individual's perceptions and emotions (Gustafson, 2001). It is an internal end-state, but one which is constantly in flux based on new experiences or information (Smaldone, Harris & Sanyal, 2005). Although our relationships to place have been considered since antiquity, emerging digital media may be altering people's relationships to place.

The rise of the Internet prompted Cairncross to famously declare that the Internet had caused the "death of distance" (1997) as a defining factor in human life. This argument is not new, but has grown with the advent of mobile devices. Scholars such as Kupfer (2007), Malpas (2008), and Meyrowitz (2005) have argued that mobile media erodes distinctions among locations, merges public and private spaces, or renders spaces generic and meaningless. Gergen criticizes mobile media for mentally removing people from their physical world: "One is physically present but is absorbed by a technologically mediated world of elsewhere" (2002, p. 227). Nitins and Collis (2013) argue that the customization and locative features of mobile media allow people to create a pre-determined individual world that cloisters them from participating in public space. These critiques have become so prominent in academic and public discourse that a 2014 episode of *The Simpsons* even parodied these concerns.

Morozov is similarly concerned about how this new technology will structure our spatial experience based on rational computer logic and neglect the human importance that "disorder, chaos, and novelty play in shaping the urban experience" (2013, para. 8). Sample (2014) theorizes that the cause of these types of problems is attributable to the affordances of the medium, which he asserts offer an impoverished tool to represent the complexity and nuance of place. Other scholars have argued that locative media is permeated with corporate messaging and spam (Vasconcelos Almeida, Ricci, Benevenuto & Almeida, 2012).

The continued growth of locative media usage prompted me to question whether critics had dismissed the potential of locative media to improve our spatial relationships. In 2010, I began auto-ethnographic explorations of my locative media usage, publishing my findings on my research blog (www.glenfarrelly.blogspot.ca). Subsequently, I conducted quantitative and qualitative studies on this topic. I investigated how individuals use locative media to interact with spatial representations to create meaning, and the impact of use of the medium upon individuals' sense of place. I explored how locative media features, such as geosocial networking (Farrelly, 2012b) and social georeferencing (Farrelly, 2014b) facilitate and prolong interaction with place and can improve sense of place (Farrelly, 2012a). Additionally, I found that locative media has the potential to improve sense of place not just for special or tourist spaces, but also for our ordinary, everyday spaces (Farrelly, 2013). Participants in my studies have also reported that locative media enables them to access, create, and share geographically relevant information in ways that would have been difficult before the advent of locative media (Farrelly, 2014a). I have found that aspects of locative media, such as its rich features to engage people with place, multiplicity of content and voices, spatial awareness, geosocial networking features, and ubiquity of access, have the potential to foster meaningful relationships to the locations we encounter.

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