

How Did I Get Here?: GPS, Surveillance Culture, and Personal Narrative

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On the 4th of December, 2013, a mysterious woman known only as Atrio descended into the maelstrom of snow and ice surrounding the isolated village of Iliamna, Alaska. A census-designated place of 109, Iliamna was suddenly an important hub in a global struggle, and Atrio was braving the elements to land at the packed gravel runway of Merrill Field in a single-engine chartered Cessna. According to the account of the action posted online later, the plane landed and the pilot informed Atrio that a 30-minute window existed before the plane and its passenger would be stranded for days in the middle of the Alaskan wilderness.

With snow bearing down, Atrio waited with increased agitation for her mobile phone's GPS to penetrate the weather and sync with a satellite that may or may not be in range in the isolated northern wastes of America's "Last Frontier." With literally seconds remaining, Atrio finally managed to simultaneously acquire a GPS signal and the village's meager 2G cellular network. Thus connected to the rest of the globe, she hastily completed her work and jumped into the waiting plane. Despite her pilot's

warning that they might not be able to safely take off, with the storm bearing down upon them, the small plane buffeted into the air and escaped back to Anchorage and civilization: Atrio's mission successfully completed.¹

All of this may sound a bit like a spy novel, and I don't think that comparison is entirely off base. Was, you may ask, Atrio working for an oil company, seeking new ways to extract fossil fuels from the harsh North? A government agent, perhaps, setting up a piece of equipment to spy on Russia across the Bering Strait? Did any of this even actually happen, you could also ask?

That last question, following the classic virtual / actual divide with which many Americans approach virtual worlds is perhaps "kind of." Atrio, you see, is not the codename of a CIA spy or the handle of an agent of corporate espionage. Instead, she is a player in the increasingly popular alternate-reality game, Ingress, developed and maintained by the Google internal start-up, Niantic Labs. The game's backstory posits a global struggle between a conspiratorial Enlightened and a plucky Resistance. Like other ARGs, however, the game is played on mobile devices in a hybrid space between virtual and physical worlds.

In Ingress, players compete to form triangles between Portals, which are positioned around the globe often at points of interest such as memorials and public artwork. In order to capture these portals, though, a player must physically interact with the virtual game space by means of uploaded GPS coordinates. And this need is what led to Atrio's daring action in Iliamna. By capturing the point for the Enlightened, Atrio

¹<https://plus.google.com/115004541265703011922/posts/SGVNx9TmhFc>

not only secured that Portal but was able to capture much of the Western coast of the US, completing a triangle that encompassed all of California. Given the difficulty of accessing this specific Portal, this capture marked a stunning coup for players of the Enlightened faction.

I tell this story as an introduction to my talk today, because, besides being a totally awesome example of the Internet extruding into the real world, I think it highlights a fascinating nexus of narrative writing, surveillance, and multimodal composition. I am interested in GPS-driven systems such as Ingress because they highlight a new and exciting emergent spatial writing that disrupts the widely-held view in composition studies that space supplements but does not supplant writing. Ingress, by gamifying the act of being tracked by your phone's GPS, also dramatizes the tensions surrounding cellphone-based surveillance recently exposed by John Snowden. As I'll be addressing in the remainder of my talk today, I am interested in the ways in which surveillance and tracking are already the raw materials of narratives written at a distance from humanist notions of "us" and from whose composition we are often excluded. Finally, I am interested in thinking through how this might inform the genre of personal narrative within the composition classroom.

Psychogeographies

Scot Barnett's webtext, "Psychogeographies of Writing," offers an accounting of space similar to the one I'll be foregrounding in this talk. For Barnett, the critical spatial theory that has dominated the last few years of rhet-comp scholarship does

not have much

to offer when it comes to examining other aspects of spatiality—including ... those “pre-reflective” (i.e. pre-theoretical, pre-representational, and pre-ideological) aspects of our embodied being-in-the-world—that, because they often fail to register at the level of conscious consideration, tend to belie critique’s abilities to demystify spatial relations and bring them under the regime of a concept capable of being known and represented within various symbolic structures.²

For Barnett, these “pre-reflective” aspects of being-in-the-world (and I’ll stop using Phenomenological terminology from here on out. You’re welcome.) register on an unconscious level but exceed our ability to represent them. Barnett further argues that technologies, such as the usage of a combined Galvanic Skin Response (GSR) and Global Positioning System (GPS) in Christian Nold’s Bio Mapping project discussed by Barnett can recover these lost dimensions of pre-reflective space. In that project, participants are connected to a GSR device to measure fluctuations in stress and other indicators of emotional being at the same time that their perambulations through the city are tracked using GPS. At the completion of this mapping, Nold interviews these subjects to determine the relationship between space and emotion.

This second level of meaning-making interests me here. These kinds of unconscious explorations are what the French Situationist movement of the 1950s and 60s called

²<http://kairos.technorhetoric.net/16.3/topoi/barnett/index.html>

“psychogeographies.” One of the best definitions of this term comes from Guy Debord’s “Introduction to the Critique of Urban Geography,” in which the practice is “the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals.”

Debord argues that psychogeography recovers the neglected ambience of a neighborhood. Psychogeography is a critical tool for urban planners to understand the failures or successes of various projects and the dependence of that success or failure on “the variety of possible combinations of ambiances, analogous to the blending of pure chemicals in an infinite number of mixtures, gives rise to feelings as differentiated and complex as any other form of spectacle can evoke”³. This infinitely complex soup underscores the partiality that Barnett is sourcing from Debord and the other Situationists, but I wonder how adaptable these methods are to composition.

For Barnett, however, following Nold’s lead, these kind of unconscious explorations allow us to “engage the pre-reflective, pre-ideological affects that *underwrite* our (i.e., our students’ and our own) decision-making abilities.”⁴ Barnett’s usage of “underwrite” is what troubles me about his usage of psychogeography. For Barnett, the unconscious movement through space represents the rhetorical canon of *inventio*, the moment of exploration that shapes the act of writing. In Debord’s understanding of psychogeography, the undirected wandering used to open up a space’s possibilities and to reveal its psychic imprints, was the point of the whole operation: while Debord talks of “careful analysis turned into account” as a product of psychogeography, in

³<http://library.nothingness.org/articles/SI/en/display/2>

⁴<http://kairos.technorhetoric.net/16.3/topoi/barnett/index.html>

their liberatory spatial practice, the Situationists became increasingly focused on the rambling itself as the point of the thing.

Barnett's account of psychogeography and writing, in contrast, views the psychogeography as the invention in advance of the arrangement of narrative reflection. While he claims that his theories supposedly articulate "a worldview that doesn't presume the possibility of coherence or recuperation but that rather recognizes and affirms the ultimate otherness and irreducibility of one's embodied being-in-the-world" and yet, at the same time, the goal of exploration and mapping is to still produce a written, ordered narrative, whereas, as I've suggested, Situationism focuses on the pleasures of experiencing a space in a new way, not on the reflection on this experience.⁵ I began, in contrast, with a story about Ingress because I'm interested in the way that GPS itself and interactions with space as such are driving emergent, global narratives. While I obviously narrativized Atrio's capture, this was already a metanarrative: the game itself, composed of spatial experiences, is already narrativizing. Where is the space for Barnett's methodology of "working-through" within this account? With the rich possibilities of GPS to tell us our stories, why must we be bound by ideas of conscious reflection and human mastery embodied by the personal narrative essay within the composition classroom? And in the era of generalized metadata surveillance, why does what we think even matter?

⁵<http://kairos.technorhetoric.net/16.3/topoi/barnett/index.html>

Distant Reading

As we have been increasingly made aware in the last few years, a consequence of our “smart” phones is that they track our every movement and, in some cases, report this information without our consent to a number of nebulous and shadowy forces: market researchers on the one hand and spy organizations such as the National Security Agency on the other (one isn’t sure who to be more afraid of). From the perspective of a psychogeographer, this kind of raw material, while often used for scary purposes, also allows for the always, already existing composition of the kind of GPS data Barnett envisions as being capable of reinvigorating our understanding of space and the unconscious within the act of composition.

As I’ve already mentioned, for Barnett, this kind of approach to space views wandering as a kind of invention: we create the raw material of our further reflection upon space. However, I want to suggest to you that the act of being tracked through time and space by your cellphone is actually more appropriately placed in the canon of arrangement. This shift is why I began with the example of Ingress. GPS-enabled games such as this one turn the player’s movements into narrative itself, without the need for the player to say what they mean in a composed essay. The game tracks my movements and places those movements in the context of a larger narrative being written by thousands of players.

This macro and micro level of analysis with respect to *my* narrative points to something analogous to Franco Moretti’s concept of distant reading, an important method within digital humanities. Moretti’s methodological model for the massive-scale anal-

ysis of huge bodies of texts emerges from a study of Emmanuel Wallerstein’s method for producing what Wallerstein called a “world system analysis.” Wallerstein’s work, if you’re not familiar with it, consists of thousands of quoted texts (“fourteen hundred, in the first volume of *The Modern World-System*” as Moretti reminds us) followed by a page or two of synthesis by Wallerstein. To get at the character of the contemporary world, or the world at any historical moment, moving beyond a few select texts has to happen.

Moretti calls this practice “distant reading”:

And if you want to look beyond the canon (and of course, world literature will do so: it would be absurd if it didn’t!) close reading will not do it. It’s not designed to do it, it’s designed to do the opposite. At bottom, it’s a theological exercise—very solemn treatment of very few texts taken very seriously—whereas what we really need is a little pact with the devil: we know how to read texts, now let’s learn how not to read them. Distant reading: where distance, let me repeat it, is a condition of knowledge: it allows you to focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes—or genres and systems. And if, between the very small and the very large, the text itself disappears, well, it is one of those cases when one can justifiably say, Less is more. If we want to understand the system in its entirety, we must accept losing something.⁶

Thinking about Moretti’s concept within our present discussion of GPS and surveil-

⁶<http://newleftreview.org/II/1/franco-moretti-conjectures-on-world-literature>

lance, though, changes the stakes of what data-mining operations do, especially when we think about them in terms of composition. While massive surveillance definitely performs the kind of distant reading imagined by Moretti, in which we can imagine our actions as the smaller, subtextual units being traced and the world itself as the larger, supertextual units in which these traces occur. Given, however, the stated goals of these plans (the identification of potential terrorists), this distant reading becomes, I argue, distant writing. In this moment of reinscription, I hope you can see how unimportant the kind of personal reflection Barnett privileges is. There are narratives being written in this scenario, but they are written about us at a distance. If the “text itself disappears” in Moretti’s account of distant reading, the “something” that “we must accept losing” in my model of distant writing is ourselves and our ability to articulate our own life narratives.

Surveillance

I mention all of this to highlight the narratives that are already being distant written about us. With regards to the recent revelations about NSA metadata trawling, the implications for this distant writing are truly far-reaching. While President Obama has insisted that the NSA is “not looking at content,” a recent study by two researchers at Stanford reveal the degree to which this metadata is itself content, not just data about data.

The researchers at Stanford asked volunteers to install a program called MetaPhone on their smartphones that logged the sort of metadata that the NSA is collecting. In

their research statement, Jonathan Mayer and Patrick Mulcher (the two Stanford researchers) offered the following:

This is, at base, a factual dispute. Is it easy to draw sensitive inferences from phone metadata? How often do people conduct sensitive matters by phone, in a manner reflected by metadata?

...

At the outset of this study, we shared the same hypothesis as our computer science colleagues—we thought phone metadata could be very sensitive. We did not anticipate finding much evidence one way or the other, however, since the MetaPhone participant population is small and participants only provide a few months of phone activity on average.

We were wrong. We found that phone metadata is unambiguously sensitive, even in a small population and over a short time window. We were able to infer medical conditions, firearm ownership, and more, using solely phone metadata. [^mayer]

The most interesting aspect of Mayer and Mulcher's study is the way in which metadata clusters implied narrative. For instance,

Participant E had a long, early morning call with her sister. Two days later, she placed a series of calls to the local Planned Parenthood location. She placed brief additional calls two weeks later, and made a final call a month after.

And of course, we all know what that means.

Or do we?

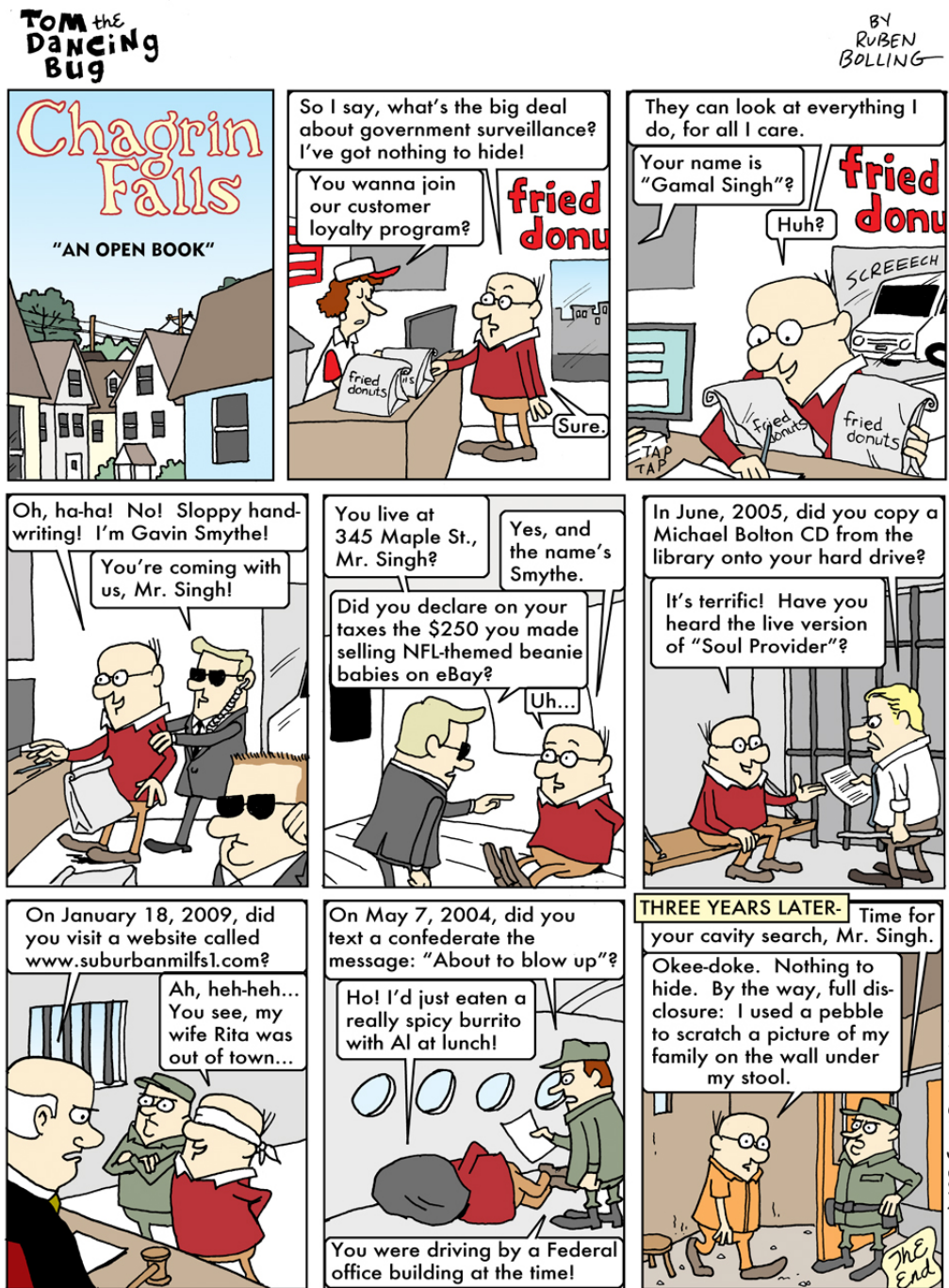
This gap between what the metadata says and what we actually know to be true is, unfortunately, I fear, what falls out of the narrative produced by distant writing. While metadata may, as President Obama assured the American public, have no content, there is clearly an implied narrative to the results of this study. While, we have no way of knowing what Participant E's actual condition was, there is a clear interpreted content to these pieces of content-less metadata.

This implied narrative is further dramatized in an episode of the comic strip "Tom the Dancing Bug," a man named Gavin Smythe joins the loyalty club at his local "Fried Donut" franchise and, because of his bad handwriting, gets entered into the company's system as "Gamal Singh.

Men in dark suits arrest him as he continues to remind them that his name is Smith and that he has "nothing to hide" from "government surveillance." Soon, the \$250 he made selling "NFL-themed beanie babies on eBay," his copying of a Michael Bolton CD "in 2005, his visiting a website called"www.suburbanmilfs1.com" in 2009, and his texting "about to blow up" (in reference to the "really spicy burrito" he'd eaten for lunch) while driving by a federal office building are all seen as evidence of his guilt as he progresses from being interrogated, to being tried in a secret tribunal, to being transported to Guantanamo, to finally, three years later, looking forward to his weekly cavity search.[^tom-the-dancing-bug]

The comic strip draws humor from the increasingly pervasive digital surveillance that

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makes up what Bruce Sterling calls the Terrorism-Entertainment-Complex. However, the rendition of Gavin Smythe as Gamal Singh reminds us how much the principle role of the massive surveillance being performed by groups such as the NSA are fundamentally about narrative. Through happenstance, Smythe becomes Singh and suddenly a host of innocent facts are assembled to tell the story of a monster.

This kind of narrativizing is of course all too much a reality.

According to the EFF, the NSA's supercomputers for performing deep packet analysis on all the information illegally acquired in their warrantless wire-tapping were "capable of analyzing 10 gigabits of IP packets, and 2.5 gigabits of web traffic or email, per second" in 2011 (and that capacity has only likely increased).^[^eff-nsa-spying] Additionally, this capacity has led to "between 15 and 20 trillion" unique transactions being collected since 2001 and stored in the NSA's \$2 billion server-farm in Utah. Beyond the kind of archives of the European novel distant-read by DH scholars such as Moretti, this is the ultimate distant reading archive.

The narrative of Smythe/Singh, however, is being composed, as I suggested earlier, at this distance, by tracing subtextual units through supertextual networks. In mapping Moretti's language to NSA surveillance, the "text" that gets lost in distant reading is our interior (which, as post-humanists we purport to not care about, right?). To loop back to Barnett's account of psychogeography, then, where is the place for personal narrative here? The composition of a personal narrative from GPS evidence tames an incomplete and fragmentary tangle of data into the interiority so valued by memoirists and authors of personal narratives everywhere. The danger of being interested in

automatic writing and digital psychogeography in the age of mass surveillance is that we risk celebrating as liberating the technologies that only further reinscribe our encaging by networks of power.

Why does it matter at all about the emotional interior of the subject of surveillance? The common defense against NSA mass surveillance is, as Smythe reiterates, “I have nothing to hide, surveillance doesn’t effect me.” The problem, we face, though, again as illustrated by this strip, is we are often unsure what the narrative being composed from our subtextual actions says about us as texts of juridical power. In our new life as data, are we (our students, our colleagues, all of us) the most privileged authors who can say what our lives mean?

All of this leaves me at a bit of an impasse. Before working through this presentation, I was all about the idea of using psychogeography as means of assembling personal narrative, revealing the unconscious ways in which our students inscribe their lives through space. I still think that texts like Ingress can be made to highlight and maybe valorize the pervasive surveillance culture in which we move. Additionally, I think the important thing to learn from Ingress is the role of collective authorship in these narratives. Barnett’s call to personal reflection merely valorizes the individual as the arbiter of experience which strikes me as irrelevant. In this age of distant writing, we are not always the only or even the most important authors of our personal narratives.

To leave you with something practical for the classroom, I’m increasingly thinking about using a GPS-driven composition assignment in which students anonymously switch GPS data and write narratives about their classmates. There are obvious pri-

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vacy implications here, so I'm not entirely sure how to implement this in the classroom, but juxtaposing what students think is happening in their lives and what a party-at-a-distance thinks seems to be getting at the ominous stakes of our new lives as data.