how GPS connects people and things

Arie Altena writes about art and new media.

In 2002 Esther Polak provided a few inhabitants of Amsterdam with a GPS-receiver (Global Positioning System) and asked them to use the device to record their daily routes through town. Since every GPS-receiver registers the position of the bearer at any moment in time, you can make a map of these movements. That was the starting point for the work Amsterdam REALTIME which Polak created together with Jeroen Kee. In the reproduction of this we see white lines on a black background, as the abstract representation of the routes of a cab driver, the cycling rounds of a housewife, and the walks of a dog owner. When Polak and Kee were developing Realtime there were barely any GPS-receivers on the market. Since then they became available at (hiking) sports shops, and you can download GPS-walks and mountainbike-routes from hundreds of websites. The geographic coordinates (waypoints) show you where to go. GPS-receivers and GoogleEarth have led to an enormous increase of geographic information for ordinary users, which is available online. GoogleEarth not only enables you to zoom in and out on satellite pictures of the earth, you can also link your own information to it and make it available to others. In the foreseeable future people will map their trips and movements realtime on the internet, so their friends or other people who are interested can always see where they are.

Realtime was an early adopter of this technology.

But why would you want to show where you are and to map where you have been? It is too easy to conclude that people just 'like' to make maps and to be able to say "Look, I've been there." And of course it's useful too. The fact is, as the geographer Denis Wood explains in his book The Power of Maps, that we stand 'map-immersed' in this world. Maps not only show you the way, they also show you a reality which transcends the limited human viewpoint. They show a reality to which we have no access in any other way. [1] Maps represent interests, highlight certain aspects and embezzle others. It is meaningful that in Realtime the routes appear only as white tracks on a black background. They emphasize the esthetics of the track. But they don't tell us anything about the reality and the motivations. [2] That way these maps touch upon the desire of man to know how he moves through space. The desire to know if there is a pattern in all those daily crossings of your town. In a mass of apparently meaningless data we can perhaps detect readable patterns, which can give us an insight that is unavailable otherwise.

In Realtime Polak deliberately does not pose any moral or political questions. Still that would have been possible. Is the realtime-mapping made possible by this locative technology not a step closer towards the society of control? People who are voluntarily tagged and always traceable?
For her it is important to show how technologies change the social behaviour, how they bring together people and objects, and how they shape and change a society.

In their theatrical mixed reality games, like Can You See Me

Now?, I Like Frank and Uncle Roy All Around You the British group BLAST THEORY examines precisely the social changes which occur under the influence of the applications of the omnipresent mobile telephony, permanent access to the internet and location-sensitive devices. Their games are being played both on the street and online. The players on the street have access to a location-sensitive handheld computer, and keep in touch with online-players through the internet. Online- and streetplayers are dependent upon each other to locate Frank, or the office of Uncle Roy. These games are about the confidence in strangers. When do you trust the indications of a totally unknown individual? Do you actually have any other choice than to put this kind of confidence in a stranger if you want to make progress?

The streetplayer in Uncle Roy All Around You who is trying to locate the office of the mysterious Uncle Roy – somewhere in the town where the game takes place - is confronted with the following question: "Somewhere in this game there is someone you don't know, who has to answer the same questions. Do you want to sign a contract with this person to be available to him or her when he/she gets into a crisis? The contract lasts for twelve months and the other player will make the same commitment." Which totally occupied citydweller wants to sign such a contract in the midst of all his or her other duties? People who claim that all our communication devices and the internet in general have only created a bigger distance between people will be sceptical. But in London more than 250 of the 280 players signed the contract. Either the game convinces the players of the importance of such a social contract, or – the cynical answer – they all just gave the socially acceptable answer.

(But even if that is true, the figure remains high).
The players who sign the contract in Uncle Roy All Around You are actually being brought in contact with each other: they exchange addresses. The game is a combination of their daily social reality and fictional scenarios; both are cornerstones of the actual experience. Online and offline, virtual and factual are literally converging.

The mixed-reality games of Blast Theory are a succesful example of a new form of locative gaming. They also prove that it is more productive to think from the positive, affirmative, constructive aspects of new technology (how new forms of social relationships and communication emerge), than to fall victim to paranoid scenario's.

They do that by posing only this question: "when are you going to trust a stranger?" Which also means: under which conditions are you going to trust new, unorthodox technology?

Notes

1. Denis Wood, The Power of Maps, Routledge, Londen, 1993.

2. The city map of Amsterdam is shown next to it, and we learn about the motivations of the people from the questionnaire that the participants returned.