Assignment 1: Spatial Humanities: Open Street Map Participation

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The intention of this assignment is to join with others in a community-engaged project to compile spatial data for public use. This is often referred to as User Generated Content (UCG). Through participation, you will gain hands-on experience and also an on-the-ground appreciation of the wider implications of your contribution.

There are three steps in this assignment:

1.   Use MapSwipe on your mobile device;
2.   Use OpenStreetMap Ireland and OpenStreetMap Editor ID to complete mapping tiles in Cork or elsewhere in Ireland
3.   Reflect and Review

The Process I undertook (MapSwipe):

MapSwipe is an open-source app that utilises user generated content to aid the ongoing Missing Maps project. The Missing Maps project aims to map places in the world that have previously been unmapped and are particularly prone to vulnerability or crisis.

I was unfamiliar with the Missing Maps project prior to this assignment and I was eager to discover more about it. This began with installing the mobile application onto my phone. I avoided reading the description of the app or any of the reviews left by users as I wanted a raw and un-biased trial with the app.

The installation of the app was standard and easy to do. Upon opening the application for the first time, I was greeted by a series of prompt cards to walk me through the objectives and the background of the app. These prompts included;

- How MapSwipe aims to save lives by helping organisations coordinate humanitarian efforts,
- A brief guide to navigating the app with regards to the controls (swiping, selecting ect.)
- MapSwipe's hope to create meaningful data and to put the world's vulnerable communities on the map.

After creating an account with the application I began my kinesthetic learning approach by exploring the different areas that the application's interface had to offer. I discovered that, similar to a mobile game, the application encourages more swiping and more mapping to gain experience and increase your level. Each swipe of a map correlated to a "swipe" to increase to the next level. The App also offered a link to the MapSwipe website, the Missing Maps Website, and an email address to contact.

When examining the "missions" tab of the application I discovered each mapping exercise is arranged in a list format accompanied by a descriptive title, the area of exercise, the percentage complete and the number of mappers active on the map.

These listings were parternered with photos of the areas being mapped. I found these photos had an immense impact on the feelings of mapping these areas. These photos showed the areas in crisis instead of just listing them with words which normalised what the app was aiming to do and i felt it is what I first engaged with in the application.

After selecting an area, the app takes you to a new page to begin mapping. This page also shows a photo of the area, followed by a descriptive title, the area of the exercise, the percentage complete and the number of mappers active on the map. In addition to this, the page also offered a further description of the area along with three options. - Tutorial - Map Now - Bugs

When choosing "Map Now" for the first time the app will present you with a box explaining how to contribute to the effort to the best of your ability. You navigate the area map by swiping from left to right. By holding down on a square it zooms in on the area for a closer look.

Finally this pop-up box explained the system for how to categorize each square of the map:

- 1 tap: Green, for yes to what you are looking for. (roads, buildings ect.)
- 2 taps: Yellow, for maybe to what you are looking for. (roads, buildings ect.)
- 3 taps: Red, for bad imagery such as clouds or blurry photos.

I spent a number of days swiping through hundreds of map tiles and began to locate roads and buildings. I immediately connected with the feeling of satisfaction as I watched my swipe count climb and my levels in-crease.

I was never someone who had many mobile games on their phone or had interest in playing them but this application feels like a game partnered with a real purpose and it is very gratifying to know that you are aiding to make a difference in areas of crisis.

The application was very user friendly, worked with minimal difficulties or issues, and had a simple interface that encouraged continual swiping.

I thought the app was enjoyable to use and found myself swiping on it without realising on numerous occasions. It did not feel like mindless scrolling like on social media sites and texting as I knew it was data making a difference.

I quickly moved up the levels and continued to map areas of crisis whenever I had time on my hands. I found it was an interesting topic of discussion for conversation between my peers both in Digital Humanities and friends outside of college. Many people like myself had not heard of the app or the concept and a further number of people had never encountered "user generated content".

This app was something I thoroughly enjoyed exploring and I will continue to use it in the future.

The Process I undertook (OpenStreetMap):

OpenStreetMap is a programme that aims to create editable maps that can be created through collaborative efforts. Similar to with MapSwipe, I had no previous experience with this programme or the concept behind it before.

As OpenStreetMap is a desktop application I searched the website and began to deep dive into a new way of mapping. Once I found a map to chose where to begin I started to learn how the site worked. It had a wide selection of places to aid mapping and was a very clean and simple site.

However I struggled to figure out how to work anything. I did not feel from the start that there was much support for someone who was new to OpenStreetMap or someone who didn't know how to use it. I could not locate an area to map correctly and was left feeling slightly puzzled.

After creating an account, verifying my email and searching the site a little further I did end up on a page that had a map on it. However despite this I was still confused as to what I was supposed to do and how I was expected to do it.

Admittedly I think these difficulties originated from using MapSwipe initially. By choosing to explore the app first the website felt confusing and complex and as they are very different mapping styles I was easily lost. I do not believe I would have struggled with OpenStreetMap as much if it was the first of the two that I explored.

I tried to open the maps in different software that the site recommended but to no avail. I simply could not wrap my head around it and sincerely left the task for a number of days in frustration.

When I returned to OpenStreetMap I decided that the easiest way for me to learn how to use the site and to explore it properly would be to map my local area as that is the place I know the best. I started with visiting areas of my local town like the secondary school I attended, areas of sporting I was familiar with and places of tourism I know of.

I quickly established that OpenStreetMap had a high level of detail and allowed you to mark in small buildings and track roads on their path. This felt more like a tie to Google maps that we are all so accustomed to. I then mapped and tracked some small paths around the town of Cobh and the surround are of the island. I was mapping roads, paths and trails for a substantial amount of time before I realised that this site also allows you to input data and information about the area being mapped.

For example I am a scout, and I noticed that my local Scout Hall was unmarked and unmapped. I began to map the building and the road leading to it. I then added the address, description, and the website ad-dress. As well as this OpenStreetMap asked me to describe the land and building itself which I did to the best of my ability. Mapping and working on areas that I know very well helped my confusion with the site.

I attempted to branch out to areas that OpenStreetMap was suggesting with their ongoing projects. Despite this I again struggled with the interface of the site. I don't feel that it is very inviting or user friendly.

When opening up projects like "Project 44, West-Cork" I struggled to find any area un-mapped already. I then came out of the project and attempted to submit that the area was completely mapped but I received errors and the site was telling me about other projects which confused me again.

Reflecting on my exploration of OpenStreetMap I can say that I did not enjoy it. It is not that OpenStreetMap is an insufficient site or project I it simply not a user face that I can personally navigate. I know peers of mind who also explore OpenStreetMap enjoyed it and found it very easy to use but this simply was not the case for me. I can confidently say that the fault was on me for my misuse of the site but in saying that I did not have any desire to continue mapping using this software beyond the realm of this assignment.

The implications of what you contributed (MapSwipe):

As I explored previously, I gained a great sense of satisfaction from watching the percentage of mapped area increase with every swipe and every time I logged onto the application. I am aware that I was not the sole mapper increasing the percentage of area mapped each time but it was rewarding to be a part of a wider community of like-minded individuals all working together towards a common goal, to map areas of crisis.

This sense of community and involvement granted by engaging with this application is one that I feel is lacking from other areas of the online world. Other community based applications, social media platforms and online forums do not award this feeling of inclusion or active involvement.

I cannot recommend this application enough for the sense of accomplishment and the feeling of generating data with a difference that it delivers. Through using MapSwipe you are watching areas of the world we live in that are prone or left exposed to crisis, being mapped for the first time.

It is difficult to grasp the realisation that in this day and age of new technology and ground breaking advancements in the online age that there could even be areas left of the world un-mapped. But this simply is not true. Areas of crisis, third world or developing countries and areas of war and poverty are among the list of areas that have suffered at the cost of being un-mapped. After all what is it that you think about when you hear the word "un-mapped"?

Unmapped means that there is not definitive way to tell where a road its or where there are villages and towns as there are no markings laid down to follow. This means after any event of disaster or catastrophe, it makes the already difficult job of providing aid that much more challenging as you are moving through area you have to map and navigate un-aided.

In my opinion from my experience using MapSwipe for the first time, the implications of what I contributed were that I, along with a hoard of mappers, are thriving to make a difference to people who have no control over whether or not they are seen on a map. This assignment has had a profound effect on me when I came to these conclusions and further convinced me to continue on with my mapping.

The implications of what you contributed (OpenStreetMap):

OpenStreetMap allows you to map areas much closer to home not only areas of crisis like other services. This is useful as it can rely on crowd sourcing to fill in blanks in maps. For example the secondary school I attended was not only unmarked but had no information about it on the site. I outlined the buildings, categorised the building as a school, marked roads in and out, and provided an address for the school as well as a website. Truth be told I am not sure what the implications of this were as I think someone needs to validate my work for it to contribute to mapping efforts but it was still enjoyable to be able to share my knowledge to help map and area.

Despite my struggles with navigating the site, there was still a sense of completion to what I was doing because it was my local area. However it did not have the same impact on me as the app format for MapSwipe as it felt much more recreational. Combine this with the fact that the mapping in OpenStreetMap is focused more on areas of urban sprawl and urban expansion to increase the succession of services in the area and you are not granted the same level of satisfaction from your mapping.

A large part of the feeling of the satisfaction that you earn from mapping areas on MapSwipe is watching that percentage rise along with knowing you are aiding areas of crisis. OpenStreetMap allows the user to chose where they are mapping instead of assigning regions, therefore the feeling of urgency subsides as you are looking at well built urban areas instead of struggling ones.

A further note to make about where OpenStreetMap feel short for me was when I identified the fact that MapSwipe was mapping un-mapped areas where as the projects presented to me in OpenStreetMap were developing and increasing the level of detail in already mapped places.

Overall I believe OpenStreetMap is a good site and idea but personally it is not for me. I much preferred the format of swiping on my phone as it was easier, took less time, and also was much more accessible instead of having to take out my laptop or log onto my PC. Through this assignment I have identified that I am a "casual" mapper and I much prefer doing it in my spare time for fun instead of sitting down and dedicating myself to mapping buildings and categorizing buildings.

What you learned from the experience (MapSwipe)

What did I learn from the experience? I can say confidently that I had never perceived a feeling of online satisfaction like this before. As I mentioned in my analysis of what I felt the implications of what I contributed were, I learned that even if, like me, you grow up in a digital age with incredible and complex technology and you develop into adulthood in the age of social media, you may still in your adult life not understand what the internet can do.

I certainly did not know the measure of the impact that a single application could have, let alone a free one, until I spent time with MapSwipe. After my time testing and analysing this platform I can honestly say that I do not look at the rest of the web in the same light.

I know that very little of what I have done on the internet up to this point has had an impact on people let alone help communities and families with the aid they so desperately need.

Sitting down and clicking some boxes to make them turn one of three colours is not a difficult task to undergo and does not take a toll on you. You may not even think about the magnitude of what you are actually doing as you are doing it. However by stepping back and looking at the bigger picture I soon realized that I was making a difference. A small one on my own but in collaboration with hundreds of other people we were mapping un mapped parts of the world for the first time. How anyone can not find that fascinating and beautifully compelling is beyond me.

What I learned from this experience of engaging with the application MapSwipe was that no one person is too small to make a difference, and that time on your phone or on an app can be constructive. That your time spent on your phone doesnt always have to be scrolling and gazing at photos strangers are putting up. We have the power to change lived at our fingertips but right now all people want to do is post what they're having for dinner or how many drinks they have had on a night out. This realisation will stay with me far beyond this assignment I know that for certain and I hope that it evokes thought in you too, to take a critical look at your digital life and how you use the resources available to you for the greater good.

What you learned from the experience (OpenStreetMap):

I learned that I need to be more open to different mediums of technology. In particular I need to allow myself to explore programs and sites like OpenStreetMap more freely and in a more detailed orientated manor. I enjoyed MapSwipe much more because I found it easier to work with and navigate, so unfortunately for OpenStreetMap I was already unknowingly biased going into my analysis of its site.

Another key point that I learned from this assessment of OpenStreetMap was that far less of the world is mapped then I had thought was let alone the lack of detail on most maps out there. I had encountered the ideology of user generated content before but it was not until this particular assignment that I experienced firsthand the impact that a group of people working together can have on the outcome of a project. The magnitude of mapping the world is a huge task to undertake with the limited resources that are in place today. I feel that there is not enough of a focus at the moment on the issue of unmapped areas.

Funding at the moment is focused on exploring our deep oceans, other planets, and galaxies far beyond our own. After completing this assignment I now consider mapping our unmapped regions of the world to be something that should be a priority for all governments and people in positions of power. How can we comfortably sit back and leave families, towns and entire communities defenseless in the face of crisis because we were too negligent to map out roads and areas to access them for aid.

This assignment about open street map participation has encouraged me to think about things and aspects of life in vulnerable areas that I previously failed to think about. What did I learn from this experience? I learned that things that we take for granted like Google maps for directions and navigation is not as widely available as I imagined it was and that there is something each of us can do to aid this effort

How you feel you might be able to apply the spatial or the crowd sourced initiatives in your own work or in your life - now or in the future (Both):

Through my personal analysis of mapping I have come to understand that user generated content, spatial initiatives, or crowd sourced initiatives are a genius way to dissect large objectives or projects like mapping large areas. By using a large number of people to reach a goal you are not only speeding up the process but you are also sharing the workload and dramatically reducing the margin of error made. For example out of a hundred people map-ping an area if in one particular square majority of people have marked it green for a sign of a road or a building and a few have labeled it as yellow then you know that there is more than likely a road or building there and you can rely on that to move forward.

In my own work or life, this app has inspired me to look further into collaboration as a workflow method. It has shown me practically, through a real-life example, the power of the old phrase, "many hands make light work". I enjoyed group work in other classes in semester one and enjoyed the collaborative experience but after spending time with MapSwipe I have a greater understanding of what you can achieve with crowd sourcing initiatives, group work and collaborative efforts to reach a common ambition.

Currently I am in a position where access to spatial initiatives. Crowd soured initiatives and group collaborative efforts are readily available both with man-power and a combination of digital and archival materials. Other people involved in something can bring unexpected solutions to problems, generate a diverse way of thinking, share a large workload to maximize time efficiency, allow for faster decision making and enhance creativity.

I can utilize crow sourced initiatives presently in my assignments, critical thinking and my ongoing assessments as well as to generate conversations around topics that I fine relative and stimulating for Digital Humanities.

In the future I am sure any job that I find myself in, no matter what that is, will most defiantly benefit from spatial initiatives and crowd soured initiatives. There is a reason that the collaborative process produces such intense and rich work. It is because you are opening your project, objective, aim, assignment or conversation to areas and aspects that you may never have explored on your own. And those are the initiatives that I feel I can apply from spatial initiatives and crowd soured initiatives in my own work and life both present and future.