Information + Exploration

As I already stated in the first draft of my thesis proposal, the acts of getting information and exploring (whether in physical space or cyberspace) are often connected and benefit each other. Two distinct and possibly conflicting principles were brought up in that proposal: 1) finding exact information as simply and direct as possible, and 2) getting happily "lost" during the art of browsing. Which is more important? Can they both simultaneously exist? And at what point to these principles diverge?

Getting lost is by far the easier of the of the two goals. However, I realized that the journey, however short or direct, should be as interesting or fun or educational as possible. With that, I wish to investigate how all of the complex, ubiquitous data that exists in our world (self-generated or otherwise) can be harnessed to not only make navigation or gathering information simpler and more direct, but more enriching, personalized and fun as well. And perhaps there exists a framework to become pleasantly lost along the way…

I've asked myself lots of questions regarding this. With experience, is it most important to get information for information's sake? Can getting information be a fun distraction, or is having the experience of quickly getting information to become the main focus? (Answer: yes).

There is plenty of ambiguity as well in these areas. Blurry lines exist between work & play, learning & navigating, searching & browsing, and destination & waypoint. How much technology should be shown or hidden? Is this process passive or dynamic? Automated or controlled? Does this involve a learning curve or is it intuitive?

Certain questions need to be addressed in this area's space, tangible or otherwise. Does this exploration occur on a computer screen, a mobile device or in augmented reality? Is it being used in existing devices, devices of the near future, or no device at all?

Finally, what are the negatives? By trying to devise a way to make navigating a richer experience (whether exploring city streets or online information), am I unintentionally adding a layer of complexity? What is the shelf-life of this product or service? What is its scalability? Is it feasible with today's technology? If so, will it be quickly outdated? Is there a market for it and can it be truly useful?

With these questions, I present my initial elevator pitch:

> For *the explorer*[1], who wants *finding and displaying information to be a richer experience*[2], this *digital product*[3] is a *navigational tool*[4] that is *simple, direct and fun*[5]. Unlike *Google Maps or Wikipedia*[6], this product is *personalized and unique*[7].

There are several steps I intend to take this Summer to refine this proposal and to dive deeper into these ideas of information and exploration. On my reading list will be such books as *Over the Edge of the World* by Laurence Begreen, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World* by Jack Weatherford, *The Master Switch: The Rise and Fall of Information Empires* by Tim Wu, and *You Are Not a Gadget* by Jaron Lanier. I hope to learn or continue learning my software skills with Processing, After Effects, ActionScript 3, and Google APIs. And I hope to discover more inspiring websites in the vein of weatherspark.com, solarsystem-scope.com, map.baidu.com, howbigreally.com, flaneursociety.org, hitotoki.org and radicalcartography.net.

Through this research, my goal still remains to encourage people to use technology to be inspired, get up, travel, explore and learn about the world around them.

FOOTNOTES

1. Also the map enthusiast, traveller, cataloger, curator, the curious or the documentarian.

2. May have other needs such as: finding their way around, getting from point A to point B, personalizing their travels, needing inspiration, wanting more fun and rewarding searches for information.

3. Can be a website, mobile app, service, digital map, or entirely new construct.

4. Other categories can include: an encyclopedia, database, wayfinder, navigation tool, community resource, open-source platform, learning tool, operating system or interface.

5. Extra benefits: filters out extraneous information, personalized, useful, interesting, precise, customizable, educational, user-generated, well-curated, or inspiring.

6. Also not limited to: Baidu maps, TourWrist, Flickr, Vimeo, Daytum, OpenStreetMap, etc.

7. Other differentiators: immersive, a memento, less distracting, more direct, wide-spanning, all-encompassing, rewarding, inspiring, all-in-one, and self-contained.