

TEXTOPIA: A GEO-LITERARY BROWSER

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As scholars in the humanities and media studies take an increasing interest in spatial theory, location-based technology provides the opportunity to experiment with spatial media in practice. The textopia project aims to approach theory through practice, providing a system for experiencing place-bound literature *in situ*: A geo-literary browser.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is a presentation of an ongoing research project, aiming to develop a system for place-bound reading of place-bound literary texts. The *textopia* system allows users with GPS cell phones, walking through the city of Oslo, to hear excerpts of literary texts which talk about the places they pass through. The texts are placed in an open database (a wiki), and not in any particular sequence; rather than an audioguide for tourists, this system is conceived as a spatially organized hypertext, to be browsed by physical movement through the city. The purpose is to facilitate new aesthetic experiences, connecting literary texts with places, both from the perspective of readers, and for prospective authors. As a media studies research project, the

aim is also to explore the potential benefit of practical experimentation and design-driven research within the humanities.

BACKGROUND AND THEORY

Among such transformations making the brute X-ignotum of the earth (if that is what it is) into a human landscape are the making of a map or of a picture, the telling of a story, the writing of a novel located at that place. (Miller, 1995, p. 16)

The history of media technologies can be seen as a liberation of communication from the constraints of time and space. The potential of locative media – mobile applications which provide media texts based on geographical location – could therefore be a significant turn in the evolution of (new) media, and an important object of study for media scholars.

Traditionally such studies are undertaken within the humanities after the fact, as historical accounts. It is relatively rare that humanist scholars actively try to contribute to the future and ongoing development of new media; such efforts are normally left to art and design departments, film and journalism schools, computer science and other fields where practical, constructive development is central (cf. Bolter, 2003b and Moulthrop, 2005). If we

believe that the humanities hold valuable insights about art, culture and communication, there is much to be lost by not involving this knowledge in practical research directed at developing new media forms and technologies.¹

Locative media are a case in point, in particular due to the coincidence in time between the so-called “spatial turn” over the last decade or so (Falkheimer and Jansson, 2006) with the emergence of location-capable mobile devices for the mass market. For a long time, scholars have taken an interest in the connection between places and literary texts; from Bakhtin's analysis of the 'chronotope' in the novel (1981 [1938]), via Bachelard's work on *The Poetics of Space* (1969 [1964]) and more recent works by Miller (1995) and others. Franco Moretti (1998, 2005) has demonstrated the usefulness of literary maps for literary studies. Such maps, providing geometrical diagrams as a means to study literature, enables scholars to “deduce the forces that [...] have acted upon it [the literature]”, Moretti states, concluding that “this is the most elegant definition ever of what literary sociology should be” (Moretti, 2005).

J. Hillis Miller, for his part, points out that literary texts are not only formed by their geographical context, but actively contribute to the construction of places:

The landscape exists as landscape only when it has been made human in an activity of inhabitation that the writing of the novel repeats or prolongs. (Miller, 1995, p. 20)

One might perceive of the various literary texts that talk about any given place as invisible layers of meaning surrounding that place, present in the cultural memory but not directly accessible or visible in the physical location. Making these texts directly accessible on site, so that an interested reader can search and browse for all the literary texts connected with any particular place in the city, seems to be an admirable goal – both for the purpose of literary education and

¹ Similar arguments have been made by Bolter (2003a and b) and Liestøl (1999 and 2006).

dissemination, as well as for enriching people's experience of their local environment.

Furthermore, making it possible for users to enter their own texts into such a system, creating a dialogue between cultural heritage and new contributions, would entail a measure of cultural empowerment of citizens with regard to their lived environment. These are the two main goals of the textopia project.

METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

The textopia project is a humanities research project, using digital design as method. As such, it should be evaluated primarily by looking at the literary texts and experiences made possible by the system. This project aims to fit into the new scholarly category proposed by Stuart Moulthrop: That of the «intervention», a cybertextual work of production which «should depart discernibly from previous practice and be informed by some overt critical stance, satirical impulse, or polemical commitment», and have «provocative, pedagogic, or exemplary value» (Moulthrop 2005, p. 5-6).

The first version of the textopia prototype was developed during the course of 2008. The development process is an open one, based on a wiki format and open source code, so the system is available to be tried out by anyone interested via the website <http://textopia.org>.² The system has two main parts: An online wiki for collecting the texts, and a downloadable application to be installed on a GPS cell phone in order to be able to experience the texts on site. The wiki model was chosen not only as a way of building up the database with a minimum of resources, but primarily as a way to give users the power to decide what content should be included or excluded, how to rank different texts, etc. The open source MediaWiki software provided an adaptable technical solution for this. The mobile browser was created from scratch in the Java programming language.³ This

² Although, at the time of writing, content has only been created for the Norwegian language part of the site.

³ Specifically, Java Mobile Edition (JME).

application allows users to browse the collection of place-bound texts through their physical movements through the city. The current version uses a text interface (with sound output) and has a basic set of features, including the possibility to filter in only texts by a certain author or group of authors.

TEXTUAL OUTPUT

Users of textopia are invited to use the wiki both to collect classical literary texts which talk about places in the city – provided that the texts are old enough that the copyright has expired – and to publish their own texts. Around 50 literary texts from the late 19th and early 20th century have been collected in the wiki by the author and research assistant Ellen Reiss, in order to build up a content base to make the system usable and testable. In order to promote further use of the system, a creative writing competition was arranged in Oslo during November 2008 – January 2009. Given the limited resources of the project the competition was a definitive success, gathering 46 contributions from students, professional authors and hobby writers. The texts submitted provide an interesting insight into what kind of literary experiences a location-based system may afford.

Contributors were asked to submit series of 3-6 texts, each located in a specific place in the city. The submissions were reviewed by a jury, which selected ten contributors to participate in a finale where they were tasked with uploading the texts (and recordings of the texts) into the system, trying out the mobile browsers to see how their texts would fit in with the city context they had placed it in, and rewriting their own texts as they saw fit. Finally, the jury gathered to walk through the city and listen to all the finalists, selecting a winner and two runner-ups who were awarded cash prizes.

The texts contributed to the competition can be provisionally sorted into three categories:

1. *Poetic augmented reality*

The program runs on GPS cell phones from Nokia using the S60 3.1 operating system (such as the N95 model).

2. *Voice sculptures*

3. *Stray voices*

The majority of the contributions fit into the first category - poetic place descriptions or stories which do not specifically engage with the location-based system, and could appearantly just as well have been written for a traditional medium. However, many of the texts in this category take on a particular role, that of a literary voice which somehow penetrates the surface of the place, bringing out the hidden mysteries or histories buried in the past or somehow underneath the surface. In this sense the system allows for two versions of reality to be juxtaposed – the poetic text and the physical location.

Oslo City⁴
And just the name in itself, ‘city’,
Just that reveals the desire to be
something else
Something bigger
(Stranger, 2009)

The “voice sculptures” are individual texts which explicitly address the situation of the text in the new medium. The poetic voice finds itself in an unusual position – not printed onto a large number of books to be spread to readers around the world, but in stead left hanging in the air, linked to the place, as a disembodied voice.

My voice holds four seasons and
any weather, it will always stay
here and never know who you are.
(Ruset, 2009)

The last category contains those contributions which were written as series of texts, stories which require the reader to traverse the landscape of the story in order to traverse the story itself. At its most ambitious, this literary structure can map out a labyrinthical train of thought onto the labyrinth of the city itself, problematizing themes such as the precision of memory and communication.

4 “Oslo City” is the (English) name of the biggest downtown shopping mall in Oslo.

I'm a little afraid each time I'm going home alone, probably because people have told me one should be. Here. In Oslo. Like this, in the evening, through grønland, up tøyengata to hagegata, past sexes gate. the sex street. [...] These distances are too long, you can't walk as fast as I want to tell. (Kielland, 2009)

Judging by the diversity of the contributions to the competition, the potential of the textopia system as a creative tool for writers appears to have been proven. On the other hand, the textopia system has so far not been a success as an online community – no users have contributed to the website since the competition ended. Judging by feedback from the competition finalists, and the amount of positive media attention to the competition, this seems not due to a lack of public interest, but rather due to usability problems with the website and the mobile application (as well as the relatively low dissemination of compatible GPS cell phones). Therefore, further development of the system aims at scrapping the relatively complicated wiki format of the website, in favour of a simpler blog format, more geared towards individual creativity and less towards systematic collection and organization. Secondly, work will be put into making a more usable mobile browser.

The textopia system has been developed in collaboration with Intermedia Lab at the University of Oslo.

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