

# a e t h e r

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## Digital Plus Real Equals Woah!

DAN SUTKO

Department of Education • North Carolina State University

A FEW WEEKS AGO, I WAS FLYING TO VISIT SOME FRIENDS, and on the plane with me were two teenagers excitedly and loudly anticipating their first flight. With a clear sky and mild weather, it was a perfect day for flying: good news for these teens, I thought. As the plane took off, I heard one of the novice travelers remark to the other, Woah! It looks just like Google Earth! (It helps if you imagine Keanu Reeves saying this.) As the full implications of this utterance hit me, I felt a lot like the character in that clip; waking up into a whole new understanding. Woah! I thought. This is what Baudrillard was writing about in 1994; and what a great opening gambit for my *Aether* essay!

This perspective—where terra Google precedes terra firma—exemplifies some of my interests in media geography. For me, Google Earth is a map, with all of the (in)accuracies and (re)presentational qualities that maps communicate. Despite my interest in critical cartographies, I still have a special place in my heart for the romantic positivist notion that maps are first and foremost representative of reality. Put another way, Google Earth is a simulation to me: it is analogous to reality. “It looks just like Google Earth!” signals a complete, Baudrillardian inversion of my guilty pleasure. Google Earth becomes simulacra: the earth—the signified—subordinated to the signifier. The earth itself becomes the hyperreal (Baudrillard 1994).

I’m interested in these intersections between the physical and the digital; the intangible and the material. Lev Manovich (2002) once remarked that although the 1990s were the decade of the virtual, this would be the decade of the real (2002). It’s also been suggested that the next evolution of the Internet will be primarily semantic and geospatial (a.k.a. “Web 3.0”). The questions implicit in future new media are many: What happens to our socio-spatial interactions when our pendular, and increasingly communicative and social mobilities, are informed, guided, and mediated through code?; how will we continue to negotiate public and private—any kind of differential—spaces?; what new social practices will we develop around this technology?; how can we educate learners to think and compose for, through, and with new media?

It's obvious that cartography and spatial philosophy have much to contribute to explorations of these questions, especially because when we speak of the digital, it's very much like speaking of the "informational," and in speaking of the relationship between the digital and the physical, there is a clear parallel to our understanding of how our space is informed and how we are informed about our space.

A striking example of the intertwining between the digital and the physical is observed in a new type of media termed hybrid reality games (de Souza e Silva & Delacruz, 2006). Hybrid reality games (HRGs) are played on location-aware mobile devices with Internet connections (e.g., most new cell phones). A digital gamespace is overlaid on top of the urban cityscape. As the player moves through the city/game space in an HRG, game play can be hindered (or helped) by physical circumstances, such as road construction, traffic jams, or back-alley shortcuts. Meanwhile, the game objectives themselves can encourage new types of mobilities through the urban landscape (the Situationists are often alluded to in the literature on HRGs and other mobile, location-based games). Players may travel to an unfrequented, out-of-the-way part of the city to complete a goal. Through these games, physical reality and digital representation are not opposed; they are merged. There are also some HRGs that are simultaneously played by stationary players on a home Internet connection and mobile players on mobile Internet connections. In one game, the stationary players are information-rich and the mobile players are information-poor; so the two must work together to complete the game objectives. In such a game, there is a multiplicity of no fewer than four spaces, each with different points of convergence and divergence; each requiring navigation and negotiation between the players. Hence, these HRGs illustrate not only how space can be produced (multiplied, divided, emulsified); but also how spaces are simultaneously communicative and social.

HRGs can help us interrogate how the information we have, changes our experience of space and our social dynamics. While HRG players can interact with physically distant people, they can also be socially distant to people who are physically close, precisely because of the different ways each person's space is informed. There are many other possibilities of how our space will become informed in the future: from GPS navigational data, to consumer data that is merged with GPS (e.g., mobile Google Maps), to technology such as **digital graffiti**, which is like short message service (SMS), except it connects to a location, rather than a phone number. As our spaces are increasingly informed, it will be interesting to see how spaces become communicative and social in different ways. I think they will be more social in some ways and less so in others: likewise our mercurial notions of public/private. Maybe we'll one day have the freedom of anonymity afforded by Internet avatars brought to our mobiles, and we'll be inspired to more readily communicate with "strangers" that are nearby, with our avatar acting as a bridge between the physically close but socially distant (c.f. Simmel, 1950). Indeed, rather than bridging physical or temporal distance, our communication technologies

seem to be increasingly used to bridge social distance (Watts, 2003), if the popularity of social networks and online Massively Multiplayer Roleplaying Games (MMORPGS) is any indication. However, Danah Boyd (2007) has recently questioned whether social networks bridge economic digital divides, and the technology I'll mention in closing adds a "picture-perfect" materiality to the question of digital divides. In this case, I'm not referring to economic digital divides, but to the informational-spatial divides I mentioned earlier, between multiple and multiply-informed spaces and the experiences of these spaces.

Just this morning, I came across *kameraflage*, a company designing reality-augmentations that are mediated through digital cameras. With camera phones quickly becoming pervasive technology, this sort of digital invisible-ink has huge potential for widespread adoption. Indeed, the future ubiquity of camera phones is one of the selling points this company stresses. On [this page](#), I find the order of "applications" compelling and provoking. The progression from cinema to public space to fashion reveals—literally—how technologies (the commercial, the informational, the digital) become inscribed on our media, on our spaces, and on our selves. Each differently augmented reality creates a different relationship to that space and to experiences of that space. Although you and I can be in the same "place," new ICTs make me question whether we will ever be in the same "space" again, and I wonder about the communicative and social effects of these multiplicities of space. A multidisciplinary and multimodal journal like *Aether* is an ideal forum in which to approach these issues, and I'm looking forward to seeing revelatory scholarly and artistic contributions that will address media geography in creative and challenging ways. I don't think it'd be inappropriate for me to wish, in closing, for a Woah! from every issue.

## REFERENCES

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