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GeoGuessr's Digital Pilgrimages

In 2012, the BBC posted an article about a thirty-year-old man who found his childhood home using Google Maps. As a child, Saroo Brierley was separated from his brother and could not find his way back to their village. He was taken into an orphanage and eventually adopted by a couple with whom he moved to Tasmania. Twenty-five years later, he was able to locate his original home by looking at street views of roads and settlements around Calcutta. This rediscovery seemed little short of miraculous, given both the size of the country and the haziness of his memory. What led him back to his village was Google Earth's photographic precision: it captured a familiar landscape in a way that came close to his lost experience of it.

Brierley's story brings out the uncanny excessiveness of digital street views as reference tools. Street views combine the high level of detail of photography with the impersonality of a map. They plant the user in an environment that is at once standardized and eerily intimate. GeoGuessr is an online game that banks on this sense of dislocation. It does so by replicating, on a small and less emotionally charged scale, the kind of scrutiny in which Brierley engaged in search of his childhood home. The game connects to Google Maps and randomly

Opposite: Model by Dongil Kim and Colin Searles from *Dense Ecologies / City and Bay.*

places the player in an unknown part of the world—any part of the world that has Google Street View (this excludes large parts of Africa as well as much of Russia, India, and China). The player can click on the street view arrows and move around however long she wishes. Whenever she is ready, she points to a spot on a traditional, two-dimensional world map and makes a guess about where in the world she has found herself. Players accrue points, exponentially, based on the distance traveled from the beginning point where the street shots were taken.

By means of these contingencies and rules, GeoGuessr turns the pragmatic practice of using digital street views merely as maps, into a sort of pilgrimage through the landscapes stored within these online databases. In the process, it makes the player aware of these disparities between the map-like and photograph-like qualities of these images. It brings out ways in which the precision of Google Maps somehow exceeds its functionality, troubling our notion of how we first get to know different places.

The detective work GeoGuessr induces is the inverse of regular travel. The player works her way backward, from continents to countries to regions, based on road signs, vegetation, and quality of light. Rather than try to reach beyond the stereotypes with which you might arrive in a new country, you painstakingly retreat toward larger concepts that might help extract meaning from otherwise featureless trees and buildings. The game quickly turns out to be much harder than it looks. At times, it makes you feel like you know no geography at all. Montana, you might discover, resembles rural parts of North Carolina: the roads are all the same width, all lined with leafy trees, with the same kind of insistently blue sky above them. In cloudy weather, you can easily mistake the Australian coast for western Germany. A public square, you might think, seems vaguely

Scandinavian—with colorful, economically designed buildings—yet turns out to be Indonesian. For a good quarter of an hour, you click around what you thought was southern Siberia, and are stunned to come across a road sign in French.

In these unknown, distant environments you might not otherwise expect to see so precisely, you cannot parse the relevant details from the irrelevant ones. If you keep clicking on the arrows posted along the digitized road, the pace at which you move is similar to a walking pace, but you are not walking anywhere, really, and all the houses and the streets you see, as well as the weather above them, seem equally significant or insignificant as entry points for getting to know this environment better.

What one begins to search for, in these eerily faceless landscapes, is not just entertainment but a suddenly lost cosmopolitan confidence and sense of orientation. It is not uncommon to get lost in a city, or even in a region of a country, but it is new, and humbling, to not be able to tell what continent you're on. Time and again, these landscapes easily resist generalizations. When one moves through them at this scale and at this pace, the stereotypes by which one may have expected one's vision of these places to be guided, or maybe even fettered, entirely fail.

Uncontained by these frameworks and limits, the accidental landscapes of GeoGuessr overwhelm like a series of suddenly revealed blind spots. They point back toward the many parts of the world you might know of, but never see at such close range, even on a computer screen. They also implicitly reveal how much more formulaic and abstract our understanding of distant places usually is. Immersed in unfamiliar views without much explanation reminds you of how many syntheses, symbols or at least signposts, you would expect to come across before seeing the place you are traveling to at eye level. Digital

maps are, in this sense, the obverse of the slick functionality of airports or train stations, or of large urban spaces in general. The only places a person's body and mind gets to know so inductively—from eye level outward—might be one's childhood home, and a small circumference around it.

To say this is not to romanticize GeoGuessr, or digital street views, as entry points to a state of greater geographical innocence and contingency—means of turning ourselves into global flaneurs. If anything, these digital maps make you wonder at how much we need positioning and guidance to turn our feelings of bewilderment into ones of recognition and care; at how much time it otherwise takes to make sense of an environment for which no one gave us a context or a bird's eye view beforehand.

Opposite: Ian Burke & Martin (1964 Competition Entry); Elements completed by Hugh Martin & Partners following Ian Burke's death, St. James Shopping Centre, Edinburgh, 1964-73. Photograph by Sarah Ramsey.