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Drawing the line: Sketch-maps and comics as a participatory research method

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Abstract:

Maps have been used as tools to represent geographic reality in symbolic ways and show how things are connected and/or related to one another. More recently, maps are being created to act as or to supplement visual storytelling. My research is concerned with participatory visual storytelling and facilitating the creation of visual stories related to space, specifically focused on cocreating visualizations of LGBTQ+ spatial narratives. This presentation will talk about proposed master's research that seeks to combine the process of sketch mapping with techniques and exercises used in comic-based research to explore more ways to represent peoples' experiences with and knowledge of spaces. By hybridizing these methods, I seek to contribute to cartographic scholarship on visual storytelling, participatory mapping, and interdisciplinary approaches to cartography.

Coming from the practice of cognitive mapping, mental maps and sketch maps have been used to represent individual and group spatial narratives and knowledge. Sketch mapping is used here to refer to the use of a spatially referenced basemap for sketching (Boschmann and Cubbon, 2014). By instructing participants to draw answers related to different experiences and knowledge they have about specific places on maps, sketch mapping empowers participants to share their spatial narratives in their own voice through their own hands (Gieseking, 2013). While individual sketch maps allow for a greater understanding of individual experiences, aggregating sketch maps from multiple people helps to illustrate patterns of shared experiences and agreements about spatial knowledge. Within an LGBTQ+ mapping context, this method has previously been used for projects like gathering collective and individual queer and trans experiences in New York City (Gieseking, 2020) or mapping spaces of safety, fear, and community amidst rising anti-LGBTQ+ legislation in the United States (Correa, 2024).

Comics are effective ways to discuss complex concepts and experiences through the approachability of the multi-modal format, familiar iconography and stylization, and relatability to personal experiences. Data comics, graphic social science, and graphic medicine employ the creation and use of comics as research tools across different disciplines. They do so by using panels to represent story beats, gutters to represent the time between moments, and the multimodal format of visual and textual information to communicate complex ideas to audiences (Kuttner et al., 2021). Comics can also be useful for incorporating empathy into narratives through their visual and textual representation of peoples's experiences and the emotions felt during them. In the case of data comics, they help to represent the personhood that can be forgotten in traditional qualitative data visualization methods (Alamalhodaei, Alberda, and Feigenbaum, 2020). In addition to communicating complex ideas and personally engaged narratives in a multimodal way, comics are great for sequential storytelling and exploring the aspect of time, a feature that is not prominent within common sketch-mapping applications.

Scholars have previously written about the benefits of using comics alongside maps to explore post-representational approaches to cartography (Peterle, 2015), map the dimension of time (Moore, 2009), and incorporating the meaning of space (Reumont, 2021). There is room to explore the use of comics in maps, especially since they rely on the same kind of interaction from readers - the movement between visuals and text to understand and extract meaning from the presented story. With the ability for comics and sketch maps to represent personal experiences, their combined use presents an interesting opportunity for incorporating stories that may be told alongside the sketch mapping process in a visual way. By using comic techniques in addition to the more established method of sketch-mapping, there is an opportunity to better explore the temporal and emotive aspects of spatial narratives. As such, I am focused on discussing how using comic-based methods can expand the narrative complexity of sketch maps and investigate what value using comics can provide to the sketch mapping process. During future research, I hope to co-create maps that can be used for sharing information and stories while sparking further discussion within a localized LGBTQ+ community.

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This research will employ a co-creation workshop structure where participants will work collaboratively alongside myself to produce sketch maps and experiment with different ways to incorporate comics to amplify the story. The collaborative nature of the workshops aims to center marginalized voices as co-designers and owners of the maps. Attempting to combine sketch mapping with comics will pull inspiration from previous comic-based research, using activities like comic-making, collage and storyboarding (Thomas et al., 2024), to name a few. Participants will also be allowed to introduce their own approaches. After the creation of initial sketch maps and subsequent hybrid maps, participants will be surveyed to gauge how the method helped to activate recall of knowledge and stories. Group discussions will also be held to facilitate conversation on what comicing techniques were most useful in creating narrative visualizations of spatial narratives.

This presentation will explore the potential merits of this proposed participatory approach regarding data collection, participant experience, and the dissemination of resulting maps through a discussion of relevant literature and the preliminary research design. Future research will be done focused on the implementation of this mixed-methods approach.

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