

# Reflection on Digital Spaces

Sigurd Strom Norsterud ESALA, Stage 2

My project for the module Digital Spaces investigates different parameters of proximity between current locations and hometowns. Using social networks like Facebook to spread the experiment, it creates a non-geographic 'map' of places that change by time and its spread.

Through the lecture series that was given, we have reflected on different aspects of digital spaces and its impact on people's lives. An important distinction is between spaces and places, and how they inform each other. A distinctly new form of spaces emerged with digital technology – one that permeates our lives in very many ways. It has redefined and extended our idea of social interaction, through social networks and other communications.

The notion of “the world is shrinking” has become a common expression to describe the increase of connectedness with other parts of the world through communication or travel. The village or hometown is no longer confining social interaction and someone's so-called 'social map'. Today, the digital space of relations is non-geographic and consists of people from and living places all over the world.

My idea for a project was to investigate this interaction through social networks and explore the proximities between the user and its friends. At first I envisioned mapping degrees of privacy or disclosure of a user on Facebook, thereby revealing a map of proximities that would change for each level of access.

The Facebook Graph API allows developers to create applications that can access information and communications with the user's permission. I have through my project gained insight into the making of a Facebook application and the potential of data available through it.

To simplify and define my project and its intentions, I decided to concentrate on collecting hometowns and current locations from each user and all their friends. Thereby the application displays a comparison between the past and present of places a user is connected to, as well as implies the transition between them. Each

participating user is revealed a 'cloud' of these places sized proportionally to each' occurrences in the social map. This is an easy and visual way to display the large amount of information that was collected.

The user may be surprised or learn something new about their own relations to friends, and is given an option to further spread the experiment on Facebook. By anonymously storing the places and its count of friends in a database, the application gathered more than 14000 friends (many of which are mutual) and over 2300 different places from the 77 participating users. Although 54 of the users were currently living in Edinburgh, the experiment also spread to other parts of the UK, Norway and a few distant places all over the world.

To exhibit the findings I adapted an open source code written with Processing, that displays each place as a bubble in a random position in relation to all other. As before they are sized in proportion to the amount of friends recorded, or optionally as an estimated value of unshared friends – thereby not exponentially increasing by mutual friends.

The time it takes for the application to spread and new friends or locations to be registered is reflected by the animation, starting from the application's first user (me) and through to the last in the chronological order it spread.

In general the results show a tendency of people being from diverse places around the world to be focused at a few key current locations like Edinburgh, London, Glasgow and Oslo. At the same time, one can image the massive range of places we have some proximities to through social networks.

The combined map itself creates a digital space of its users that may continue to grow if the application spreads even further. For me it has been interesting to explore the proximities to places that were possible through the experiment, as well as providing a way for individual users to understand their own. I hope to improve the Facebook application to display the same animation as the exhibition, so the experiment may continue to grow and spread.