12-1-2020

Searching for 360

Kathryn Waring
SUNY Geneseo

KATHRYN WARING

Searching for 360

In Google Maps, I still live in Rochester. Zoom in on my old apartment in Street View and you'll see my silver Neon parked outside. It's November 2015, and it looks like midday—the sun is high, my neighbors have gone to work, and there are barely any cars parked on our street. The park across from our house is empty.

Click on Rochester, NY in Google Maps and a link pops up with photos to explore. Many are just regular photographs, but there's a growing number of 360 images, too. Among the first is a 360 of High Street. Here, in Google Maps, it's October 2015, and we are in the Northeast quadrant. It's a residential area of the city, not far from where I once worked. Zoom in and you'll see a woman sitting on her front porch. Five pumpkins are arranged on the porch steps in descending size order. The woman stares at her hands—holding a phone, perhaps? You can't zoom in far enough to see for sure. You wonder what she is thinking about—kids, a partner, a job—but Google doesn't say. Down the street, a child rides a bike, feet permanently frozen on the pedals.

Not long after I move to Pennsylvania for graduate school, I start making 360 videos. At first, it's for a class. A friend and I, partnered up by our professor, leave the city and drive an hour southeast through rural Pennsylvania. I've just moved to Pittsburgh; he's grown up here. We stop at a middle-of-nowhere town, where the fire station doubles as a community center and bar. We've heard rumors of a UFO that crashed here back in the 1960s, and we want to use 360 to capture this place and the story that remains. We set out to learn more, camera in hand.

In Google Maps, I exist, but only in fragments.

Here, in Google Maps, outside my apartment in Rochester, it is November 2015 and I have not yet moved for graduate school. But when I type in the address of the office where I once worked, it is 2017 and I have already left. On South Ave, it is the summer before I leave, and I am at a bar with my friends, sitting around a fire out back. You can't see it, but my roommate throws darts at a board nailed to a tree. Scroll down the street, however, and we flash forward to 2018. Here, in Google Maps, I still exist, scattered across a city I no longer call home. But each time the Google car drives by, bits and pieces of the life I used to live disappear.

When I try to explain to my family what a 360 video is, I tell them to picture themselves in Google Maps. Inserted into a string of still photos taken at street level by Google's fleet of camera-equipped cars, you can walk around, toggle yourself left or right, up or down. Stroll through the street as if you are actually there.

But Google didn't create virtual reality. The concept of VR predates the term: in the nineteenth century, artists painted 360-degree murals that filled the audience's entire field of view. Robert Baker, an Irish artist, used the term *panorama* to describe his cylindrical paintings. Derived from the Greek *pan* ("all") and *horama* ("view"), panoramic paintings allowed the viewer to feel present in the scene depicted—often, an historical event. They allowed the viewer to step into the past, even if just for a moment.

In Google Maps, I type in the address of my grandparents' old home. Out front, it is 2013 and they have not yet sold their house. The red cardinal my grandmother painted onto the mailbox is still there; their last name handwritten on the sign above it. In Google Maps, I am relegated to the street, but if I zoom in close enough I can see a shadow standing by the first-floor window. In this version of reality, my grandparents still live at home. There are no assisted living facilities, doctors offices, or long-awaited phone calls to see which, if either, will remember me on any particular day. In Google Maps, their car is still parked in the driveway, a Christmas wreath hanging from the front door.

In the small Pennsylvania town I visit with my friend, in Google Maps, it is still 2008. The fire station has not yet turned into a bar, and the parking lot

is empty. In real life, we talk to the bartender and locate the spot where the UFO supposedly crashed. As I drive past, my partner sticks the camera out the car window to record. We interview locals and add soundbites to the film. We want the viewer to explore the area alongside us; we want them to make their own decisions about what happened, and why, and how the community reacted. In 360, the audience becomes a participant. In 360, it seems like anything is possible. Nothing is out of reach.

In Google Maps, I visit the house of a friend who died of a drug overdose. I scroll down the street to my grandparents' home; my childhood home; the first apartment I ever lived in. I visit the places I used to work, and the versions of myself I used to be.

But there's more to Google Maps than just my own past. When I'm bored, at home, in the attic apartment I've recently moved into in Pittsburgh, I log onto Google Maps and explore the streets of cities I've never been and likely won't ever go. I'm not sure why. Maybe, it's the digital equivalent of being a fly on the wall of a room I don't have access to or maybe, it's a form of voyeurism. On the news, I hear the names of countries and cities I've never visited and I want to know more than what's edited into soundbites. On TV the news is always bad but here, in Google Maps, life at least appears to keep moving.

In Aleppo, Syria, it is July 2017 and a user named Mahmoud Marshaha has uploaded a 360 inside of a children's clothing store. A sign on the wall declares "no smoking!" in Turkish. The store looks brand new: the floors are shiny; ceiling lights reflect back at us. Someone has stacked dozens of shirts individually wrapped in plastic on the floor into neat piles. Tiny, brightly colored shirts hang off the racks mounted to the wall. One has an image of a smiley face emoji wearing a bowler hat, SMILE written in all caps underneath. A man in a blue button-down shirt stands behind the counter. I see outlines of people walking down the street through the store windows in front of me.

Google Street View could never produce an image like this: Google isn't allowed inside of buildings or stores. But private citizens are. In recent years, Google Maps has given users the ability to upload their own 360 images. We're no longer relegated to the street. Now, we can navigate restaurants and stores and the insides of people's bedrooms. In Google Maps, there is life, splayed out on the internet for anyone to see.

In Google Maps, there are still mistakes. I type in the address of my first apartment in Pittsburgh, click on Street View, and am teleported to a different Portland Street in a different city. This street is not my street; that house was never my home. I'm on a highway staring up at a truck; I'm looking at a field where there should be houses. In Google Maps, I try to visit an apartment I once stayed at in Germany. I don't remember the address, but I search for the mosque I remember next door. I find the mosque, click on Street View, and suddenly I'm in Istanbul. In Google Maps, the road we choose isn't always the road we take.

After I start shooting in 360, I fall in love with the form. Because of its possibilities, and because of what I think is a controlled surrender: the ability to showcase a scene in its entirety, raw and unedited. But I am searching for a 360 that doesn't exist, a medium that lets me tell a story that's not in fragments. What I don't understand is that a photo, even in 360, is just a stage. Behind every door there is a loaded gun; a crashed spaceship; a person casting a shadow. The most interesting part of a story is always just out of frame.

In Google Maps, lives are captured, but never fully. When I log into Google Maps, I see an archive of the places I've been. Every time I use the GPS on my phone to navigate somewhere new, it remembers. Coffee shops and stores and friends' houses. Cities in other states and countries. But the list isn't complete: there are homes I've navigated to without GPS; places I no longer need Google Maps to find. For now, I can go back in time and trace my life through Rochester, or visit cities I've never been to but would like to know. But these are just fragments of reality, digitized—never a whole life.

In my real life, it is 2020 and I am teaching college students from a desk in the corner of my bedroom. Outside, Pittsburgh brakes to a halt due to a pandemic that no one saw coming. But in Google Maps, time has not caught up: I scroll through the streets of Manhattan to Times Square, and a crowd of visitors line the big red steps; down the street, a double-decker tour bus stops at a traffic light. No one wears masks. In Google Maps, there is the recent past and the further past but nowhere is there the present: click here, and I am shooting darts at at board nailed to a tree in Rochester; click here, and I am walking past a mosque in Germany; here, and I am sitting around a fire with my friends.

In my real life, I press pause. I haven't left my neighborhood in over a week. Instead, I log onto Google Maps and think of all the places I'll go

once it's safe. I've never been to California but here, in Google Maps, I can pretend. I am on a beach in Santa Monica; I am on a mountain at Yosemite; I am walking through downtown LA. In Google Maps, I watch the sun rise and set and rise again. In Google Maps, I don't need a plane to travel.

 Sometimes I wonder how many other people log onto Google Maps, just like I do when I'm bored at home sitting in my attic apartment. Do they explore the images others have uploaded? Do they search the maps of their lives, jumping from apartment to apartment, neighborhood to neighborhood, city to city? Do they consider all the places they will go once the pandemic is over? What do they see? What is remembered? And what—old homes, former selves, a shadow of a family member just out of frame—can never be traced?