

Google, there's no such thing as 'the perfect map'

The corporation should be honest about its cartographic ethos: its Google Maps app is partly a tool for delivering ads



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The Hereford mappa mundi, c 1285, shows Jerusalem at the centre of the world. 'World maps are always made with the beliefs and prejudices of their makers.'

On Wednesday Google announced the most radical overhaul of the company's online virtual maps application since its creation just eight years ago. The revamped application is clearly a riposte to Apple's disastrous launch of its own mobile maps application last autumn, when Paddington vanished and Dublin gained another airport. Google's improvements have come with a claim that, as a cartographic historian and the author of a book on the history of world mapmaking, gave me a distinct feeling of déjà vu. "A perfect map of the world," announced Google vice-president Amit Singhal, echoing just about every great mapmaker since Ptolemy, "is foundational to delivering exactly what you want, when you want, and where you want it."



The Hereford mappa mundi, c 1285

As far as Singhal and Google are concerned maps are better, and bigger business, than ever before. With an annual revenue of about \$3 billion and a 70% share of the global online search market, Google now relies on its map applications to enable people to search online more effectively using geographical rather than alphabetical or numerical information. If you're not convinced, then google "Chinese restaurant". A map pops up, which can then guide you to the restaurant, where you buy your meal, marvelling at how Google generates literally billions in advertising revenue for leading you every step of the way.

Throughout history, mapmakers have promised "perfect" world maps that give us what we want, when and where we want it. The question is: what is it that we really want, and how does a map help us get it? World maps are always made with the subjective and ideological beliefs and prejudices of their makers. What they usually do is give us security, by confirming where we are in the world. For the Greek geographer Ptolemy, a perfect world map showed the Mediterranean at its centre, because anywhere beyond it was "barbaric", and in contrast to Greek culture, "uncivilised".

The Hereford mappa mundi, made around 1285, put east at the top and Jerusalem at the centre, which was a "perfect" way of showing the world according to Christian belief, with Christ at the map's apex, waiting for the day of judgment. During the Renaissance, Gerard Mercator's famous projection stretched the poles to infinity because the commercial world of the time had no interest in them, and was trading east to west, not north to south. When the East German socialist Arno Peters offered a "better" world map to Mercator's in the 1970s, he used an "equal area" projection that tried to address global inequality.

Each of these maps made claims to be perfect, and they certainly chimed with the hopes and fears of their communities. But they were only partial images of the globe, because it is impossible to map the spherical earth on to a flat surface without some distortion – whether it's on paper or, in Google's case, a computer or phone screen. What Google is doing is creating a map that is "perfect" at this point of time for maximising online profit. The map is, in their language, becoming "monetised", where the Earth itself becomes a browser in a profitable but rather depressing feedback loop of buying, selling and

advertising.

Google should be honest about its corporate cartographic ethos and admit that its map is a partial tool in the current online global economy. If not, then their applications could go the way of that other "perfect" map on a scale of 1 to 1 described in a short story by [Jorge Luis Borges](#). "Succeeding generations understood that this widespread map was useless ... They abandoned it to the inclemencies of the sun and the winters." E-commerce might be even less forgiving than fiction.

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