Digital Oceans & Algorithmic Castaways
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Abstract
As a result of the digital revolution, legal complexities have increased for internet users. With an undisclosed and dispersed world network, users are often bound to sovereignties and laws they are unaware of. In this article, the author explores how internet corporations are redefining geopolitics in relation to traditional imperial models. Through two artworks, this essay reframes the best-seller novel, *Robinson Crusoe*, within the context of current technologies. Further, the author proposes considering the figure of the castaway as a framework so as to reflect upon the political position of users in relation to the internet infrastructure.

Keywords: geopolitics, cloud, internet, user, colonialism, netart.

Fluid Territories
A general perception of the online world is that of a disembodied corpus. Signals traveling instantly via orbiting satellites. Perhaps an ethereal, magical cloud. The internet, however, is unquestionably grounded; a network of computers, located in countries across the planet, connected one to another by buried cables, owned by companies. As for its distribution of power, labor, tax flow, these are much more complex territory.

For Benjamin H. Bratton, new sovereignties emerged with the digital revolution.1 In his article, *The Black Stack*, he states that contemporary cloud platforms are shifting traditional core functions of states, such as infrastructure, legal identity, currencies, comprehensive maps and flag-brand loyalties as they create new spatial and temporal models of politics. As the internet becomes not merely a space of diversion but a place where we define and express ourselves, conduct our work, and pay our bills, cloud platforms are redefining geographical and political boundaries.

According to international law, an internet user is to be treated as if they were physically in the country where the service’s server is located.2 However, the single, or sometimes multiple locations of a cloud platform’s servers are usually undisclosed, as are the various laws that apply. Motivated by lower taxes, favorable data-privacy laws, cheaper infrastructure or faster connectivity, cloud platforms sometimes choose to host their services on servers located in jurisdictions different than the company’s origin.

Although physically we have only one body, we are simultaneously governed by a multitude of legal jurisdictions. As users, we are often left with dozens of user agreements, too long for our comprehension, to which we must agree, or be denied services. There is no dialogue, no bargain. Cyberspace, as a regulated space, tilts the legal power balance between users and jurisdictions in favor of corporations. Not only is cloud corporations’ management not democratically elected, but corporations further evade regulations by playing with their headquarters’ locations. In this liquid environment, users’ agencies must be reclaimed through visibility and critical user experiences.

Adrift on Digital Waters
The artwork, *Blue Vessel* (2017), explores users-corporation relationships within a plausible dystopian cloud interface. Designed for the intimate space that is the viewer’s own mobile device, *Blue Vessel* is a mobile web app hosted on a server located on a flagless ship, drifting on international waters; a juridical loophole in the cyberspace legal system that places the app users legally nowhere. More than a nostalgic reminder of the utopian non-space3 some once thought the internet to be, it is an expression of users’ agency, or lack thereof, in the global network of infrastructure.

The *Blue Vessel* app has two functions: “browse” and “write messages.” In “browse,” users navigate through a collection of survival-instruction links, in a browser that disintegrates with each scroll. With each user’s attempt to see more, the interface responds with less. Although the links are still active and accessible, the letters on the screen float and bump into each other, ultimately becoming unreadable. The user is hence left with a sea of randomly moving blue letters, becoming the navigation between the archive, an out-of-control experience, and the location of the user within the collection, utterly lost.

The second feature, “write messages,” consists of an interface that invites users to compose texts by selecting words on a grid of nine that change with each of the user’s word selection. The design is powered by a natural language processing machine learning algorithm trained on the book *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe. This eighteen-century novel, narrated in the form of a diary, portrays an Englishman, who, fed by colonial ambitions, embraces a journey that leaves him stranded on a seemingly uninhabited island, where he replicates European technologies.

Through the machine learning driven interface, users are pushed to write messages within Defoe’s story, in a collaboration and an agency battle between users and the app. The written messages, when sent, become anonymous URLs, floating adrift on the internet waters to be found by chance by an unsuspecting viewer, or never to be found at all; as proverbial messages in bottles doomed to oblivion.

A cloud service artwork, *Blue Vessel* invites users to embark on a voyage across unseen spaces of digital communications. Embark on a voyage that prompts users to rethink cloud platform interfaces as active agents in URL and IRL interactions. *Blue Vessel*’s writing algorithm is fed by the famous English colonial novel as a strategy to expose the silent and constant influence these algorithms have in everyday digital communications. The artwork adopts an algorithm similar to the one employed in the autocomplete feature of mobile phones’ keyboards, but instead of being trained with a dataset of common digital text-based communications, it is trained with a crude narrative as a dataset. The unexpected source of data disrupts the feedback loop, making the task of creating meaningful content with the *Blue Vessel* interface surreal. As a result, the authorship role of the algorithm is brought to the fore.

New technologies, especially the ones used in cloud platforms, are questioned by the artwork as vessels for imperial agents that are redefining geographies, cultural influences, labor, and capital flows.
Mapping Data Flows

Data is a result of every interaction within digital interfaces. Digital data, in its vastness, is harvested to classify, analyze, predict, and optimize human experiences. Machine learning technologies carry the promise of making sense of all this data. Its algorithms learn from the data we create to produce the data we consume. They learn from us to ultimately shape us. We teach machine learning algorithms with the data we produce as individuals, but we are daily under the influence of the medians of their datasets, produced by millions, designed and classified by corporations. As users, we are being over-individualized when data is collected from us in order to create a unique online world experience for each of us. Simultaneously, we are pluralized when our data is part of a general dataset that will be used to teach machine learning algorithms. In this paradox, all agency is reserved for systems’ designers, to software, to cloud corporations. Everyday consumer software and its interfaces define our digital experiences and consequentially determine how we access information. It is their designed algorithms that deliberately decide how data will be processed, what will be used and what will be discarded, and what patterns will be favored.

These questions of authorship are at the center of the artwork Anonymous (2019). In a two-channel video installation, a machine generated voice recites a story created by compiling and ordering the messages sent with the Blue Vessel app. The formed story is a collage of statements, a collage of voices. Between sense and nonsense, between the formation of recognizable patterns and randomness, the collection of messages embodies the struggle between human logic and machine logic. Anonymous’ story epitomizes a crusade between the driving forces writing the text (the users, Daniel Defoe, the algorithm and myself).

The Anonymous epic maintains the religious and moral fanaticism, the loneliness of the character and a life of sea travels that are present in Robinson Crusoe. However, the narrator is a woman, and the story is about emancipation from imperial powers. A visible shift in the hierarchy of the elements in the original story, resulted from the users’ agency, and mine, interacting with Defoe’s story.

While the new narration is recited by a machine learning generated voice, trained with my voice, two videos display virtual voyages around the globe in Google Earth: Robinson Crusoe’s voyage and Alexander Selkirk’s voyage (whose castaway was Defoe’s inspiration for Crusoe’s story). The digital travels expose a zoomed-in Google Earth experience, an abstract virtual blue that denies location recognition. An endless blue that can be navigated, or we can become lost in, like oceans themselves. A blue that transforms digital space into space.

Anonymous presents a conflicted reconstruction of a notorious imperial narrative within contemporary times. In this tale, the colonizing powers are cloud platforms, the vessels are designed algorithms, the oceans are made of digital data and the narrating body is the result of a battle between users, an A.I algorithm and myself interacting with a 1700’s writer. Together we challenged inherited colonial and racists patterns embedded in the original text. This open experiment welcomes users to think of influences and agencies rooted in digital infrastructures. It embodies how data is malleable, and how sensible the task of ordering information is.

Algorithmic Castaways

In Mapping the Digital Empire: Google Earth and the Process of Postmodern Cartography, Jason Farman claims that imperialism, as it was previously known, no longer exists. It has been transformed by a new form of sovereignty, which is defined by the control over information flows and the infrastructure that supports them. Cloud platforms embody a corporate evolution of old imperial axioms. In this new ecosystem, the power structures that rule the world are often concealed, directing life from behind the curtains.

James Bridle explores the geography of the internet infrastructure and users’ hidden alliances with his project, Citizen-Ex. With a browser plugin, Bridle allows users to uncover their algorithmic citizenship. As labor, relationships, and information access becomes more mobile, we are becoming increasingly bound by several jurisdictions and their laws. Algorithmic citizenship hence stands for the sum of the sovereignties that through our online interaction we are subjected to. But perhaps, we could rather talk of the contemporary beings as an algorithmic castaway. Like Robinson Crusoe dwelling on the caribbean island, our algorithmic citizenship is not chosen but determined by technological and geopolitical currents. Forces hidden from us and beyond our control determine what sovereignty we are subject to. They might even change directions without us knowing it. We are adrift on the information network and castaways in remote servers. The artworks, Blue Vessel and Anonymous, explore contemporary geopolitics conceived in a networked world, inquiring on the heritage of cloud platforms on colonial models. An uncanny interface and a digital ocean place users/viewers marooned on virtual experiences that propose a critical appraisal of designed interfaces, the algorithms that power them, and the locations that host the digital services. Somehow, the information age has made us feel both liberated from a ground position and confidently able to navigate the deep waters of remote information flows. However, information has never been so mediated or sovereignties so consequential.