Technology

Outdoor art with a difference

Tech tools are democratizing creativity in new and exciting ways

By Joseph Wilson

When an e-mail landed in my inbox describing the "world's biggest drawing," I expected something huge: a canvas the size of the CN Tower, maybe, or a tarp stretched across the English Channel. I wasn't expecting a portrait created with a single brush stroke 110,000 kilometres long.

Last year a video was posted on You-Tube of Swedish artist Erik Nordenankar packing a Global Posi-tion-ing System (GPS) into a briefcase and sending it around the world. The GPS "drew" tracking lines connecting the cities included in the itin-erary, resulting in a remarkable self-?portrait that spanned the globe (biggestdraw-ingintheworld.com).

Just recently, though, Nordenankar admitted the whole thing was a fraud, created as a graduation project for the Beckmans College of Design in Sweden.

"I think it's possible to realize the project for real, but... I have realized the idea in a fictional way," he wrote on his site. I felt cheated.

Fortunately, there are artists who are using GPS trackers as legitimate drawing tools. At gpsdrawing.com, artists Hugh Pryor and Jeremy Wood post dozens of drawings they have made with their GPS gadgets over land, water and in the air in major cities across North America, Asia, and Europe.

The most impressive is a giant battleship made by tracking a 67-?kilometre bicycle ride through the streets of Brighton, England.

In 2007, Nokia began a marketing campaign to push its N82 GPS cellphone by using the fictional artist Stavros to explain this new form of GPS-?based "position art" (theworldismycanvas.com). Like most corporate versions of innovative art, though, Stavros's drawings are pretty dismal.

Corporate takeovers of art subcultures aside, a burgeoning crop of artists are reclaiming personal technology from the claws of marketing firms. GPS-enabled cellphones are often sold as a way to make travel easier and more efficient, but more creative types have recast them as tools of whimsy. In 2004, students in NYU's interactive telecommunications graduate program recreated the 1980s video game Pac-Man in the grid streets of Manhattan around Washington Square Park (pacmanhattan.com).

The position of the ghosts and Pac-Man himself were tracked using cellphones and continuously uploaded to a computer. Pac-Man could even "eat" power pellets that rendered him invincible for a few minutes.

Games like this are doubly inven-tive because they use technology us-ual-ly derided as alienating and iso-lating to reconnect people to the public spaces around them.

Imagine exploring your city as the blue ghost (Inky) in a live Pac-Man game with a GPS monitor tied to your chest.

Another new form of personal tech-nology gaming, geocaching, takes its name from the Greek word for "earth" (geo) and the French one for "hide" (cacher). Participants hide tiny trinkets and prizes around their city and post GPS coordinates on websites like geocaching.com and terracaching.com. Treasure hunt-ers then head out and use their systems to find the goodies.

Caches have been hidden up trees, 50 metre underwater, on mountaintops, even within the Arctic Circle. The only rule is that once you find something, you must replace it with another prize and document your find in the accompanying logbook. In the GTA, geocache enthusiasts converge on the sites ontgeocaching.com and ghcaching.com.

Get busy recasting that device clipped to your belt as a tool for creativity and fun rather than a ball and chain.

tech@nowtoronto.com