

Regrets

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CREATIVE FIELDS SUCH AS OURS THRIVE ON CRITIQUE. For many of us, being part of a network of cartographic professionals means exchanging advice and feedback with colleagues, including suggestions for improvement. It can also mean silently observing the maps of others and pondering, consciously or otherwise, how we might do things differently. This process of thinking critically about other people's maps, by and large, helps us all grow our skills. But, the reality of human nature means that the urge to critique can sometimes lead to toxic outcomes that harm our community. This I know from personal experience, for I was once a source of such negativity.

From 2009–2016, I ran a blog called *Cartastrophe*, in which I took other people's maps and pointed out their flaws. There was plenty of sarcasm. I'll spare you any direct quotes because I think you know how it goes; most all of us have seen a map (or another creative output) that we thought was poorly executed and made a crack about it, either aloud or in our mind.

This effort began when I was in graduate school. Many of my peers had blogs, and my advisor was nudging me toward establishing an online presence. This was during an era in which blogs were a big part of how many cartographers communicated online, before other forms of social media really took over the community. They were a way to get noticed and to network.

I did not start out intending to mock other people online. I originally wanted to write about my designs, and share my thoughts on various cartographic topics, as my peers did. But it quickly turned out that I didn't have a lot to say, so I instead shifted gears and launched *Cartastrophe* (the idea of simply not blogging did not occur to me, I suppose). Complaining about the work of other people was simply easier than coming up with more positive contributions.

I think that I am far from alone in finding it much more challenging to describe the merits of a good idea than the perils of a poor one.

In my mind, I was doing a service to the community by providing educational content. I did try to make *Cartastrophe* more than a place for simply complaining that some mapper had done a bad job: I wanted to use these examples to **teach**. As with any good critique, I tried to explain my rationale: **why** I thought certain things should be changed, and what the author's "mistake" could teach us about design and human perception. I also required myself to say a minimum of one nice thing about each map, and I occasionally posted analysis and critique of maps that I really liked. Finally, I tried to show that I and others were not immune to mistakes: a few colleagues and I each posted critiques of our own work. In the end, though, most of the site was me posting what I thought were "bad maps," and telling people how I would have done better.

Whatever pedagogical value the site had is overshadowed, in my opinion, by the damage caused through its approach. I took people's maps, uninvited, and **publicly** stamped my thoughts on them. I did not ask the authors about their goals or process; I made assumptions, instead. I did not ask them if they were comfortable with a public critique. I did not ask them what they thought about the work—maybe they didn't even like it; I have made plenty of things for which I no longer wish to claim. I did not invite them to be a part of the process of improvement and learning. They never had a chance to explain themselves before I passed judgment.

This sort of public shaming does real damage to our community. I have heard several of my colleagues describe their hesitancy to publicly share work or ask for feedback specifically because they have seen how some maps are



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mocked online (not necessarily by *Cartastrophe*; I am not the only one who has done harm here). One even commented that such practices made him hesitant to even *make* maps in the first place. Our friends and colleagues are denied the opportunity to grow in their skills and careers if they cannot safely share their work.

There is absolutely value in looking at other people's designs and learning what we might want to avoid. We shouldn't stop having, or sometimes sharing, negative thoughts about some of the maps that we see. But, it's all about the approach and context: my good and/or educational intentions were offset by the harm done through my mocking tone, and the fact that I rarely included the original map author as a consenting partner before dressing them down in front of my modest audience. The blog even described the map authors as "victims" of my commentary.

I don't mean to suggest that we always need the author's permission to share our opinions on a map; the context really matters here. Did this map come from a student, or a government organization? Are we warning the public about a dangerous error, or simply nitpicking label placements? What is the power differential between the critic and the author? Are we punching down or taking on the powerful? Any of these factors can change the ethical calculus. A seasoned professional holding a student's work up for ridicule to an audience of thousands is a very different situation than a presentation at a local GIS meetup that explores alternatives to a confusing color scheme used in a map published by a national newspaper.

I cannot hope to offer a formula leading to a perfect answer of when and how to offer unsolicited cartographic advice; perhaps there is an ethicist out there that can. But, privately weighing all these factors in my own case, I think that I did more harm than good in offering my opinions.

I ran *Cartastrophe* because it was an easy way to get attention when I was in graduate school—I *suspect* that witty mockery is more likely to garner a following than positive commentary. It was easier for me to point out flaws than cogently praise excellence, and it was easier to write quips about the failings of other people than to form coherent thoughts about my own cartographic practice. And it was easier to feel I was a good designer if I could break down ways that other people were not. That's the core of it.

I am certain I'm not the only one to offer a critique for such reasons, and I think there is an important lesson in that. When we feel an urge to offer our opinions, I believe it's worth asking: what's really driving this critique? We generally offer people advice because we want to help them, and because it's satisfying to see works improve and people grow, but more selfish motivations can infiltrate our intentions. Sometimes we might offer critique because we want to show off to people, to get them to praise us, or to entertain them. I believe that these motivations linger within each of us, whether or not we act upon them. I think that it's natural as a human being to feel the urge, from time to time, to make ourselves look better, or get attention from others, at the expense of somebody else. It feels good to be acknowledged as superior in some way. It's an easy trap to fall into: offering critique more for the needs of your own ego than for the benefit of the person who made the map, or for the people who might read your opinions. Avoiding this trap requires that we be vigilant and honest with ourselves about our motivations.

Cartastrophe is gone now. I mostly stopped posting to it by 2012, and finally took it down a few years ago. Unfortunately, the attitude that informed it persists elsewhere. For years, maps were brought up for public shaming on Twitter via the #cartofail hashtag, though I have observed this sort of practice less and less in recent years—maybe it just shifted to communities outside my notice. A couple of years ago I watched a shocking conference presentation in which the presenter spent their entire time ridiculing maps that they didn't like, and encouraging the audience to laugh along, without offering much practical commentary. The problem of ego-driven critique persists.

I doubt that any of us who have publicly shamed and mocked maps are unusually monstrous. We simply did not consider much beyond the benefits to ourselves, nor the fact that our actions might harm others. I believe that a greater emphasis on empathy can guide us toward a way of critique that both teaches an audience and respects the cartographer.

To that end, I have changed my approach to critique as I have gotten older and more experienced. While I cannot offer a comprehensive guide to offering critique ethically, I find that my thoughts on the subject are best summarized by a sort of poem, or perhaps series of aphorisms.

Critique with empathy.

Assume that the designer is, like you, a human being capable of both complex thought and honest mistakes.

Ask yourself how this competent and well-intentioned person could reasonably end up making decisions that you consider laughable, erroneous, or ill-conceived. That was unlikely their intent.

Consider the tools, privilege, and knowledge that this person did not have access to, and which you might.

Ask questions before offering assumptions.

Remember that the answer is always more complicated than “the designer is just stupid.” You know that the real world is richer than that.

Reflect on the ways that you could have fallen into making that “design mistake.” Perhaps you did once, in the past.

Don't mock your past self for the sin of combining honest effort with inexperience. Critique yourself with the same compassion that those around you deserve.

Accept that other designers' goals may differ from yours. Realize that the things that you want to change, may in fact be unimportant to what they are trying to do.

Remember that most of the design details that we teach and debate at conferences are usually unimportant in the big picture. This is liberating.

Admit your goal to yourself. If you offer a public opinion because you want attention, that is natural. It feels good to be acknowledged as an expert, or as entertaining. Own this honestly, and without shame.

Ask yourself how you can earn this good feeling without demeaning or otherwise harming someone else.

Remember that critique is always personal. There is no clean separation between the artist and the art that allows a wholly dispassionate discussion of someone's work.

Think about how you've been stung in the past by critiques, no matter how well-intentioned, or how much you agreed with them.

Be kind when wielding the benevolent scalpel.

Understand that it's OK for a designer, including you, to not want feedback. Sometimes it's fine to let a work be what it is, and move on to other things.

Enjoy the unintended laughter that you sometimes find in the works of others. Share that quietly among friends, not with the world.

Never feel bad for wanting to improve someone else's work, but accept that it is not always productive to share those ideas.

An empathetic approach such as this is valuable because it improves the odds that feedback is listened to. It can be frustrating for someone to hear that they need to make major changes to something they've worked hard on. It is natural for them to potentially feel defensive, or embarrassed, or maybe even shamed when hearing about things that they could have done better. Approaching with a positive, conciliatory attitude can put the author whose work you are analyzing at ease, helping them to set aside their own ego and engage in a discussion with you.

I think it's valuable to consider the author as your potential collaborator. They have a map, and you have suggestions: how can you both *work together* to improve the product? Imagine a team of colleagues working on an atlas, meeting regularly to provide suggestions that make their mutual project better. Their focus is not on who made a particular map, but on producing a work they'll all be proud to have their names on. They're all in it together, and their approach to feedback is collaborative. If the giver and recipient of feedback both set aside their egos, this can be the result.

But making real change often occurs out of the spotlight, and collaboration is frequently behind closed doors. Social media, blogs, and other public fora, on the other hand, tend to steer us toward garnering attention for our own needs.

I share these thoughts because they were words I could have stood to hear when I was younger, and because I think that our cartographic community still has work to do in order to overcome some of its gatekeeping behaviors. I am sorry for my part in having been one of those gatekeepers, and for the hurt that I likely caused through

Cartastrophe. I will surely continue to make mistakes (hopefully different ones!), as will all of you. But, if we continue to mindfully place a strong emphasis on empathy and collaboration, I hope our future errors will do less harm.

