Gaming the Ingress System

by Kaitlin O'Brien

While I have not used any type of spoofing software to disrupt or confuse my locational data, I can understand users spoofing their locations not to have an advantage in the game, but to falsify the data records Google is collecting on behalf of Niantic Labs. Giving a corporation like Google open access to the location data being collected on one's phone is a scary concept because by doing so, one is disclosing areas that are frequented by that person. To make a mockery of the fact that Ingress is in fact a "form of digital economic exchange—one that requires the 'datafication' of one's mobility and communicative action in exchange for the gift of play" (Hulsey & Reeves 1) it would not surprise me if game players were also using these spoofing applications to disrupt the validity of the data being gathered by Google.

This whole notion of Google gathering the data of game players ties in to Baudrillard's idea of collecting. In the article "The Non-Functional System, or Subjective Discourse. A Marginal System: Collecting" he states that an object "has two functions- to be put to use and to be possessed" (Baudrillard 1). In the context of Ingress, the game itself puts the players to use by having them participate in game play to have them work toward achievements within the game. At the same time, this game participation is done at the cost of disclosing locational data and enabling access to one's Google account. In doing so, Ingress possesses the game player by seizing that person's personal data, collecting it and selling it to external stakeholders that are keen to learn about the locational and online habits of game players within certain geographical parameters.

Today's class discussion began exploring the exploitation of game hacks. In the context of Ingress, a quick Google search

returns countless results related to various attempts and approaches to location spoofing, as well as follow-up documentation in many cases of the game player reflecting on the process involved when he or she was discovered by Niantic Labs to be cheating, and then consequently the termination of that player's account on the part of Niantic Labs.

Over the years, Ingress has mitigated a wide array of hacks in many ways. One game player, largely interested in the immersive nature of Ingress decided to use his forum as a means of unearthing the various ways one can hack Ingress. This user posted a list of the loopholes within Ingress that would provide opportunities for hackers, to show Google and Niantic Labs that changes need to be implemented on the backend of the game to make for more fair and honest game play.

A user by the name Tapion notes:

"You could prevent the creation of second accounts by verifying new users and devices with an SMS. This simple shrewdness could have prevented me from cheating and publishing this post.
You could check the accelerometer and the compass to see if they are static or they are moving.
You could check the IP of the client and restrict his playground not in his own city, but at least his region or country.
You could check if the GSM cell matches the provided GPS position.
You could check if the WIFI networks matches the provided position.
You could try to associate user's speed with his transport.
You could check if the user is moving in a line, through walls and buildings or he is following the shape of the streets" (Tapion, "How to Cheat on Ingress (or: Sorry Niantic, I Cheated)".

When considering the various instances of hacking in the game, I also find myself considering the repercussions of what would happen if Google or Niantic Labs were hacked. Both stakeholders possess key information about the game players engaging in the game play of Ingress. A hack to either company could be catastrophic because it would mean that game player's physical locations, the routes they frequently navigate, their email list and also their entire GMail account would be in jeopardy.

Works Cited

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