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Bunkerology – a case study in the meaning making practices of on-line urban exploration forums

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Abstract

This paper analyses the meaning making practices operating within internet forums for urban explorers. The paper is based upon a case study: the way in which one type of abandoned Cold War bunker, the 'ROC Post', is made a subject of signification within one such internet forum: www.28dayslater.co.uk. The paper examines how this online interpretive community (Fish 1980) generates and enforces its underlying structures of representation, and in particular considers the way in which web forum software contributes towards this structuring.

Introduction

This paper analyses the meaning making practices operating within internet forums for 'urban explorers'. An influential user guide to urban exploration defines the activity as:

"seeking out, visiting and documenting interesting human-made spaces, most typically abandoned buildings..." (Ninjalicious, 2005: 4)

There is nothing to stop individuals visiting modern ruins and making their own sense of these abandoned "non-places" (Augé, 1995), however to participate in the urban exploration community by submitting on-line accounts of visits one has to learn to conform to the ordained 'ways of seeing' (Berger 1972) operating within this community. This paper presents a case study examining the ways in which stable descriptive conventions are created for the signification of abandoned underground nuclear fallout monitoring bunkers within one such internet urban exploration (urbex) forum: www.28dayslater.co.uk.

My study was ethnographic in aim, seeking to learn the 'rules' by which accounts of urban exploration forays are constructed and circulated on-line. The self-publishing opportunities for urban explorers on internet blogs and forums has opened up direct access to a rich mass of participant 'accounts' readily available for study. In the blow-by-blow exchange and debate of posted site visit accounts on its web forums, the process of operation of urbex as an 'interpretive community' (Fish, 1980) is laid bare.

Writing and circulating accounts of exploration to unusual (and/or perilous) places is nothing new. Precursors can be seen, for example, in the autobiographical accounts of grand touring and tomb raiding proto-archaeologists like Belzoni in the Nineteenth century (Romer, 2005). Whereas the Victorian tomb raiders achieved posterity through graffiti and self-published memoirs, their twenty first century descendants achieve this through their on-line accounts.

Dodge (2006) has pointed to the importance of studying urbex site visit reports as ‘accounts’. For Orbuch, accounts are "verbal and written statements as social explanations of events" (1997: 456), and in particular arise where the actor is keen to *explain* behaviors that might otherwise be seen as deviant. Deyo (n.d.) echoes many commentators on urbex who see the rise of self-publishing as the key differentiator between their hobby being *trespass* or *exploration*.

Accounting thus relates to the performance (and repair) of self: Goffman (1971) and Garfinkel (1967). In this tradition a study of accounting behavior within urbex should investigate the content of the account, the conditions under which the account will be made, and the conditions governing whether the account will be accepted / acceptable, and my study attempts this.

This paper will show how at least this one type of urban exploration is structured by clear representational rules circulated via its on-line community, and (applying Bourdieu, 2010 and Foucault, 2002) that that culture is reproduced through a mix of conscious and structural aesthetic and epistemic control.

Doing ‘urbex’ on-line is not an anything goes endeavor, for the account will only be valid, and thereby capable of creating ‘posterity’, if it conforms to the aesthetic and procedural conventions of the forum to which those accounts are submitted.

Bunkerology

This paper sets out a case study of the meaning making practices of one sub-topic area of the urban exploration community, the seeking out and exploring of abandoned military bunkers (something that for convenience in this paper is defined as ‘bunkerology’). In a companion paper (Bennett 2011), I have examined the non-internet related aspects of the organization of bunkerology, setting this alongside a critique of existing theoretical interpretations of why urban explorers do what they do.

The following is a fairly typical account of an urban exploration foray, in this case an exploration of an abandoned World War 2 deep shelter in 2008:

"Drove down here on a quiet Friday night in March with X1¹, X2 and X3 and spent a good 2-3 hours wandering around mapping the tunnels out and taking in the views. It's an interesting (and very large) complex for sure and is luckily still in pretty good shape - a few bits of chalked Motorhead graffiti from '83 were all I spotted..."

This account was posted to an urban exploration internet forum site www.28dayslater.co.uk. Accompanying this short text were twelve photographs cataloguing, in moody high definition, the structure and ephemera of this abandoned subterranean place: corroded light switches; a "1980s coke can near graffiti dated 1983"; a leaking oil drum; and views of the shelter tunnel, showing its shape and form.

¹ NB: The identity of all observed participants has been disguised via “X” coding.

Beneath the posted account was opportunity for registered members of the forum to post comments on the account and/or to supplement or correct the account's interpretation of that place. All of this is visible to the general public.

This paper's empirical investigation focused primarily upon the account and meaning making practices exhibited by a handful of urban explorers in the researching, inspection, exploration and enjoyment of one type of abandoned bunker: Royal Observer Corps (ROC) monitoring posts (ROC Posts). Around 1,500 of these small underground bunkers were constructed from the mid 1950s, distributed evenly across the country to serve a nationwide nuclear monitoring role. The bunkers comprised a single underground pre-cast concrete room buried at 10 feet depth, accessed via a hatch and ladder well. This network was abruptly abandoned in 1991 when the ROC was suddenly stood down. As we will see, many of these bunkers now remain accessible to bunkerologists, in various degrees of ruin.

In contrast to the more exotic, rarer and relatively difficult still to access regional and national command bunkers, the small, localised, rudimentary and generic ROC Posts offered empirical advantages for my project – for the bunkerologist has to work harder to 'make meaning' in his forays to these site, making those cultural processes easier to spot and analyse.

The study design

This study sought, through a passive internet ethnography, to learn the 'rules' by which accounts of urban exploration forays are constructed and circulated – and thereby establish how 'meaningless' places, now lying unloved and abandoned by their former military owners, are rendered meaningful in the discourse of those urban explorers who engage in bunkerology.

The study was primarily based around the analysis of accounts posted on the *28dayslater* urbex forum for UK ROC Posts whose names begin with A, B or C in the forum listing. This comprised approximately 200 individual accounts of around 150 individual ROC Posts. This comprised only 10% of the total bunker related accounts on that web forum but this number was considered sufficient to provide data saturation sufficient for this study.

The sampled ROC Post visit accounts were logged and rendered suitable for theme analysis by using Delicious.com, which enabled each web-page to be logged with descriptive theme labels ('tags'). This then generated a text database that could be interrogated in order to display all web-pages (many of which were individual ROC Post site visit reports) for which particular tags had been allocated. This presented 'clusters' of recurrent tags – giving broad shape to the nature of the content and preoccupations of each web-page. The data was also subjected to image and text theme analysis.

The rules of ROC Post accounting

"Solo visit. The flavour of the trip was to go and see good 91' closures and locked 91' closures. 68's were off the list because I had too many to look at anyway. Having been to Aberlemno before and couldn't work the t-bar, I returned only to find out it was a 68'. Epic readiness fail. Open, 68'. Internally post retains cupboards and full body splint." (X9)

In this section I analyse the conventions of making a valid on-line account of a ROC site visit. The report extract above, submitted by an experienced forum 'elder' shows the maturity of such accounting in terms of the stripping of extraneous (i.e. non-confirming) information and the desire

to ‘tick all the boxes’ of the unwritten – but evident – conventions of reporting. Namely what should be mentioned, and how?

This ‘maturity’ is attested to by the extent of abbreviation and indexicality (inferential reference to things – interpretive rules – not fully enunciated within the text itself). Here is an account that assumes that it’s reader will know how to decode it.

X9 is the moderator of the *28dayslater* ROC Post thread. It appears down to his guiding hand (and the conventions and taxonomic structure of the *28dayslater* forum site as a whole) that the ROC Post thread is ordered into a classified ROC Post catalogue, with sites ranked alphabetically and without duplicate threads. Through X9’s interventions, reordering posted accounts, reviewing and querying new postings and exercising quality control over acceptable text and photographic accounts, the site has become the resource that it is. X9 has a particular aversion to abbreviated, ‘textspeak’, and chides one contributor:

“Please don't text speak mate, makes you sound like a moron 🤡”

X9 uses animated emoticons: thus 🤡 to soften his corrective commands. He also shows some acute diplomacy in nudging account posters away from unacceptable behavior (presumably to avoid the forum itself being brought into disrepute and being seen to expressly condone criminal damage):

'Yes, don't go breaking the padlocks off mate. Not saying you would, but that's what your first statement sounded like.'

The uninitiated are also catered for (in usual web forum manner) via a FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions) entry point – a commandment ‘Please read first’ – a file setting out the ordering and content requirements for acceptable accounts and giving contextual information about the ROC and its posts.

Under the steerage of X9 the *28dayslater* ROC Post forum has evolved a clear reporting format that replicates most of the following features in most accounts:

- whether the visit was alone or accompanied;
- a brief introduction (one paragraph) to contextualise the visit and location of the site;
- specific comment on the condition of the hatch, key type and means of entry;
- a verdict on the condition (and sometimes the restorability) of the Post;
- how many sites left to visit; and
- photographs (some of above-ground features, some of sub-surface).

We will consider the conventions for images below. The text component is steered particularly towards factual, descriptive accounting. This is the language of surveying. The valued portion of the account is the factual description of the state and accessibility of the Post. Unless presented pithily the human circumstances of access and viewing are unwanted. The *28dayslater* ROC forum plays out as a collaborative (and competitive) network seeking to build a picture of the state and condition of this physical network of abandoned bunkers. Accordingly, comment that moves the community closer towards classification and understanding of these places is privileged.

Threads seek to interpret features thrown up by an account, and a discussion plays itself out by iteration. Within this ‘elders’ seek to add value by adding concepts from within the sub-genre and/or other fields of technical knowledge, thus in a collective rumination upon the causes of ROC Post flooding displays of technological expertise are to the fore, displayed as claims to expertise:

"Yeah, like I've said to a few people on here, it's definitely not leaving the hatch open which is the main cause of flooding posts, there was a few 68's in Wales which the hatches were open when we arrived and the posts were dusty dry even in the sump. I have a feeling its more than likely either demolished vent/fsm pipes, or some other underlying issue with the concrete's water resistance (cracks, imperfections). Also the area's water table must have a lot to do with it, perhaps in more (previously industrial) area's such as mining, the water table will have risen." (X9)

In his observation of underground explorer group, *Subterranea Britannica*'s (Subbrit) forays Smith notes bunkerologists' completist and competitive tendencies, he describes listening to two Subbrit members conversing, thus:

"Bob was talking animatedly to one of the potholers. I struggled to follow the minutiae of Bob's conversation. Then I realised that to follow it was miss the point of it. Bob and the potholer were both talking more than they were listening...Facts, if that's what they were, were flourished like winning hands of cards." (2004: 318)

This points to the role of the (sheer) accumulation of data within this practice. Site knowledge (and the number of sites visited) becomes a badge of honour. It is something accumulated, as (for Bourdieu, 2000) “cultural capital”, and it can be deployed in accounts and conversations as a way of increasing that capital through a form of contest and circulation. X9 reports covering 39 ROC Posts in one 4-day visit to Scotland (and announces as a standard motto for each of his accounts how many Posts that he has visited to date). On another occasion another poster appears to apologise (X43) to his peers for having only now “getting my backlog cleared” (of account writing up) using the language of business and work to describe a voluntary, hobby, activity.

Another practitioner (X44), indicates that he's going to stop at 100, a nice round number, and a saner stopping point than “doing a Catford”: a reference to Nick Catford, the Subbrit membership secretary, who visited all 1,563 ROC Posts in the 1990s.

The epistemic dynamic that comes to the fore within ROC Post bunkerology, as it lacks the ‘adventure’ of more dangerous and variegated ruins explored in other areas of urbex, is completism. A focus upon the accumulation of data for its own sake. This manifests as an ever more obsessive drive to view and record as many ROC Posts as possible (and in any case even more than your peers). The die-hard ROC Post bunkerologists are aware of this obsessive dimension, and to seek to show that their practice and extent of involvement has not, quite just yet, reached the pathological. In the arena of ROC Post urbex, the natural affinity to train spotting, bird watching and sport fishing becomes clear. The event occurs in order that it can be described and the metric of success becomes numeric rather than qualitative. The narrative largely disappears, to be replaced by taxonomic accounting, broken only by occasional ironic self-deprecation.

Yet, even with such stripped down reporting, the account writers appear to still be influenced by, and attempting to symbolically honour, more generic urbex account writing tropes. This effect can be illustrated by the narrative treatment of ‘danger’ within ROC Post accounts. Account posters exchange detailed information about ‘danger’ encountered at ROC Posts. But the ‘danger’

portrayed is often of a comic variety: “nettle world”, “stinging forest of death”, “beware of the security ducks - they will chase you”. It is allusional, black humour, that dwells upon the ‘risk’ of having narrowly escaped being attacked by a big spider, frisky cows, aggressive geese or vicious vegetation.

In such references a jokey, but proud, account of physical accomplishment is being portrayed: an abjection-lite. In circumstances where more serious danger has been encountered – stumbling upon an IRA weapons cache, drug den, a former suicide scene, a sado-masochistic playroom, a tramp’s lair or a hostile landowner the depiction is concise, and unsure of its narrative. For the repeat ROC Post visitor is not actually expecting such ‘excitement’. This narrative constraint can only be understood in the context of the thrill, adventure and a visit-specific ‘story’ that is expected to be present in mainstream (i.e. non-ROC Post) urban exploration accounts. For example, an account of an asylum visit will be expected to feature an instance of an on-site encounter with the paranormal and or security guard. The jokey exaggeration of the peril posed by natural features in ROC Post accounts appears therefore as an intentionally ironic nod to the standard urbex reporting tropes. It is as though the ROC Post account writers realise that these places are by comparison rather uneventful, but feel duty bound still to ‘tick the box’ on these core tropes.

ROC Post bunkerology exhibits a positivistic obsession with the taxonomic *surveying* of ROC Posts. This form of urbex has skewed away from the more narrative driven, adventuring, event-creating tropes. Instead the signification consists of an intense focus upon small scale differentiation. The meaning is ‘made’ through such scrutiny. The task becoming something akin to a repetitive ‘spot the difference’ contest with he who spots the most gaining the greatest respect in that community.

To understand the ‘meaning’ that is being created by visitation to these places one also has to appreciate that in ROC Post bunkerology a process of *serial* survey is taken to its extreme. To appraise an abandoned asylum and to write an account of that visit a participant needs to know something of asylums in general. But to write about ROC Posts, that necessity for cross-reference (that indexicality to ROC Posts as an aggregate and as a *system*) becomes amplified – partly because of the paucity of differentiation between each post, and partly because these places were built as, and form, a network of installations. Haakonsen (2009: 6) importantly identifies this serial aesthetic in her theorising on how visitors make ‘meaning’ of abandoned Nazi coastal defence bunkers in Denmark:

“...bunkers are not perceived as entities but in a seriality, and this is a key factor in their experiential value. The endless repetition constitutes an immense war landscape, only to be fully united on a map and in our own imagination.”

And one might aptly substitute for Haakonsen’s final sentence: “...only to be fully united via an internet forum by which this network can be collaboratively pieced together”.

Thus, for some participants, it is not so much that each individual bunker is ‘of interest’, but rather it is the bunkers as a system, a network that intrigues them. Through serial survey something of that ‘bigger-picture’ will become knowable through the aggregation of site specific data.

Given the generic design and content of ROC Posts account makers have their work cut out to produce either new (or better) accounts of the Post than previous visitors. It is also difficult to find something new to say between different Posts. The experienced ROC Post visitors do not seem bothered by this - they know what they are looking for as identifiers of a “good” Post, and tell the

community when they find it (they also announce in equal detail when they find a "minger"). For sites that lie between these two extremes the convention is to focus on subtle variance. For example each Post had an allocation of "Glitto" branded powdered bleach and Government issue toilet roll. Accordingly the physical condition of the Glitto and/or the variation in toilet roll branding found at the site is a cause for remark and photograph. In one account the crescendo of the report is a photograph of "naked Glitto!": a small tower of solidified powdered bleach left in place despite the decay of its surrounding wrapper.

In a thread discussing accounts of a ROC Post abandoned in the 1968 round of closures there was mutually supportive chatter about how the site was one of the best '68 closure sites and the beauty of the surrounding views. Implicitly the poster was thanked for bringing this beauty / good news to the forum members' attention. In such thread chatter there will be requests for clarification and general comment, thus:

"Really nice post that, love it. The second shot is great, is that the sea?" (X15)

Within this dialogue a clear framing of bunker aesthetics is formed – the extremes of well preserved and seriously degenerated bunkers are rendered noteworthy, clear (factual) descriptions are the subject of praise and stimulation of discussion.

The primacy of the visual

"I consider the photography a very large part of why I explore, and the love of photography has made me want to explore more and more impressive places." (X9)

The websites and accounts reviewed for this study testify to the primacy of the visual in accounts of urban exploration forays. It is clear that for many participants it is the opportunity to take photographs that is the key motivation for their exploration. In examining this motivation statement it is helpful to adopt upon Urry's (2002) theorising of the 'tourist gaze'. Drawing on theorists on photography like Berger, Barthes and Sontag, Urry (2002: 127) considers that:

"To photograph is in some way to appropriate the object being photographed. It is a power/knowledge relationship...photography tames the object of the gaze (at least momentarily - at the moment of taking the photo)."

To photograph can therefore be seen as an act of either appropriation or resistance: in the sense of photographing places that are (or were until recently) 'forbidden'. There is a 'trophy' (or scalp-taking) aspect to the way in which photographs are taken 'home' and posted as accounts of places explored.

Photographic depiction is not however 'anything goes' - as we will see below. As with written accounting, urban exploration forums enforce standards on what is an acceptable (i.e. post-able) photograph, and conformity to urban exploration visual tropes will accrue acclaim. In this regard it is necessary for practitioners to learn how to compose urban exploration photographs, to learn their interpretive community's "ways of seeing" (Berger, 1972), just as it is necessary to understand the visual conventions of conventional tourist photography. For, as Urry notes:

"As everyone becomes a photographer so everyone also becomes an amateur semiotician." (2002: 128).

Account posters are aware that they are operating within a defined set of representational conventions. Photographs will occasionally be prefixed with a knowing observation, such as (for a photo showing the sky and access ladder viewed from the base of the ROC Post's access shaft):

“And the view up, as always” (X60)

A comparative analysis shows how images of ROC Posts closely honour the tropes of industrial and asylum urban exploration iconography, and that in turn those tropes appear to derive from classical ruin aesthetics. The weeds reclaiming the Parthenon, the fallen statutory, eroded enscriptions and traces of former habitation all map through into the predominant representational themes that are to be found in ROC Post accounts.

Despite their ubiquity and lack of variation between ROC Post sites there is an unstated expectation that the photos that accompany accounts will honor these conventions. Photographs that do not conform, will be consigned to the ‘Where posts go to die’ folder – because they don’t ‘fit the bill’. The main criteria for incarceration in this forum dead zone appear to be blurry photographs and images that foreground the visitor rather than the place visited. These rules are unspoken but evident through practice, policed by the moderators (and other elders) and self-policed by those who post: by their adherence to these conventions.

Conclusion: framing and sustaining bunkerology

This paper has attempted to show how at least one type of urban exploration is structured by clear representational rules. To be a member of an on-line urbex community requires that the participant accept, and operate, according to that community’s ‘way of seeing’, its interpretive culture. That culture is reproduced through a mix of conscious and structural aesthetic and epistemic control.

At the conscious level X9 (and his fellow ‘elders’) exercise editorial quality control over submissions to the forum. The forum is a ‘willed community’, one in which a practice is celebrated and shaped in the interaction between its members through an everyday mix of competitiveness and collaboration. Elders guide (and at times chastise or exclude) newer entrants who have yet to master the social conventions of these virtual ‘meetings’.

Sardar’s pessimistic (and dismissive) view that internet forums are all about taking and not giving – that they entail “isolated, insatiable, individual desires feeding blindly upon each other’s dismal projections” (2000: 745) cannot be sustained if the actions of those elders are examined, for in considering the accounts, and the feedback given upon them, it was clear that the ‘elders’ have little patience for those who take from the site without giving in equal measure. ‘Flame wars’ appeared rare in the ROC Post forum, but where they arise at all they tended to result from newer members asking questions which the elders see as impertinent – impertinence being measured by whether the enquirer appears to be failing to make an effort to find the answer for himself. Unwillingness to help also appears proportional to the amount of postings, as oft repeated by X9 in attempts (as moderator) to conclude a flame war:

“You’re obviously not here for any reason other than to check up on other peoples posting, you don’t have any reports to your name, so it’s hardly a two way relationship is it? Either back off, or leave.”

From this quote we see that the number of reports posted acts as cultural capital in the Bordieuiian sense (2000): the moderators will go to the aid of someone (or leave them to ‘drown’) dependent

upon their recorded amount of participation in the forum's meaning making endeavour. The circulation of conforming accounts via the forum also reinforces the collectively ordained 'way of seeing' via the ability of forum members to denigrate or praise accounts (and to add to them).

At the 'unconscious' (structural) level the practice of bunkerology is shaped by influence of pre-existing received aesthetic tropes of the picturesque, the sublime, the notion of a 'good photograph', and it is also shaped by the very architecture of the software (*vBulletin*) upon which these forums are based. For these platforms structure accounts as a database, assuming (and thus imposing) a positivistic (i.e. scientific) ordering of the accounts and account-making. Submitted accounts can only become part of the *28dayslater*'s community's knowledge base - to exist at all - if they can be sorted and stored by urbex genre, site location and alphabetised. Photographs are held in these accounts alongside text, rather than separately ranked and ordered by purely artistic or phenomenological criteria. The epistemic role of such pre-ordering by software warrants further investigation – for the database derived platform style in use as the base for the *28dayslater.co.uk* site was observed in the study as the base also for many other collaborative forums.

This paper seeks to show the ways in which, contrary to the pessimism of Sardar (2000) or Keen (2007), this incidence of "mass amateurization" has created its own powerful quality and relevancy "filters" (both terms from Shirky, 2009: 98). To successfully account and achieve the "cultural capital" (Bourdieu, 2010) flowing from participation in these forums these conventions must be adhered to. Yet these conventions are not fully the active creation of these forums. They are also shaped by what Lessig (2006:121) calls "code", the very architecture of the software and hardware by which the forum can interact and accumulate its collaborative grand survey. Benkler (2006: 133) takes this further, acknowledging that in "commons based peer production" the normative coding of practice arises from both the social and the software/hardware architecture. Adapting Benkler's words, in the *28dayslater* forum we see an instance of "...independent creation that coexists and coheres into usable patterns..." (106) for the user community as a whole via tacit subscription to an the interpretive community's norms.

This analysis suggests that Web 2.0's facilitation of mass amateurisation does not inevitably brings with it an epistemological 'anything goes'. Bunkerology's collaborative endeavor rests upon a stable aesthetic framework, a framework that is innovative in its openness to entrants and distributed in the sense of the spatial location of its participants, but this is not a distributed in the sense that now "everything is [allowed to be] miscellaneous" (Weinberger, 2007). Yes previously meaningless places are enchanted with new meaning by these enthusiasts, but a stable (and successful) ordering of knowledge then emerges within this interpretive community.

Left to run long enough, disciplinarity (for Foucault (2002) the tendency towards regimentation of bodies of knowledge) might even emerge to 'professionalise' this body of knowledge, reintroducing distance between the 'amateur' and the 'expert', much as it did in the nineteenth century to redefine tomb raiding as "archaeology".

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