

Theresa Quill\*

## Why do we have this? The case for collecting and preserving "weird" maps.

*Keywords:* cartographic collections, ephemeral maps, fictional cartographies, cartographic instruction, primary source instruction.

*Summary:* The Herman B Wells Library Map Collection at Indiana University contains all the usual types of maps that you would expect to find in a large academic library: topographic series from around the world, thematic maps, city plans, and government documents. But it also contains a growing collection of "weird maps": internet memes, maps from tv shows and movies, and even board game maps. One might ask what the value is of collecting and preserving maps that can sometimes hardly be called maps, especially in a time of ever-increasing space constraints. How do we even collect ephemeral digital cartographic material? What is the research value for such a collection? This paper makes the case for collecting fictional, ephemeral, and "weird" maps for use in instruction and research.

### Introduction

#### *About the Herman B Wells Library Map Collection*

The Herman B Wells Library Map Collection at Indiana University Bloomington ("the map collection") contains about 400,000 sheet maps with a global geographic range and dates ranging from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century to present. It is a primarily circulating research collection, with geographic strengths in the Midwestern United States, Russia and Eastern Europe, and the African Continent. It also contains a growing collection of "weird maps": internet memes, maps from film and television, board game maps, and pictorial maps.

Historically, many of the sheet maps were acquired through the Federal Library Depository Program (FDLP), an initiative of the Government Publishing Office (GPO) to send materials published by the United States government to libraries around the country for preservation and public access (*Federal Depository Library Program*, n.d.). Materials sent through FDLP include maps from various government agencies including the United States Geological Survey (USGS), Department of Agriculture, and the CIA. Maps received from the FDLP vary widely in subject and utility and can be found at most large American university map collections.

Another major historical source of maps for the map collection came from the Library of Congress Geography and Map Division Special Map Processing Project. Former map librarian Dan Seldin participated in the Special Map Processing Project that offered duplicate maps from the Library of Congress' collection in exchange for cataloging assistance (Andrew et al., 2021). Indiana University received several important collections through the Library of Congress program, including a large collection of Russian topographic maps from 1890 - 1945 (Quill & Dalmau, 2019).

#### *Cartographic Formats*

While most of the map collection is made up of print maps, the collection also contains born-digital cartographic materials and geospatial data, as well as selections of the print map collection that we

---

\* Indiana University Bloomington, [theward@iu.edu]

have digitized and georeferenced. One collection in this category is local government maps that are born-digital and produced as PDFs. For those maps, the librarian manually downloads the PDF maps each year and prints a copy to be cataloged. The printed map is cataloged and stored in the map cabinets, as any other sheet map would be. The PDF version of the map is deposited in Digital Collections ([digitalcollections.iu.edu](http://digitalcollections.iu.edu)), Indiana University Libraries' (IUL) image repository.

Digital Collections also hosts digitized maps from the collection, including Russian Military Topographic Maps, Indiana Historic Maps, and the Alfred Kinsey Map Collection. These collections were selected for digitization based on user demand and digitized in-house. The library retains the print copies of these high-use collections as well. Patrons have used these maps in historical research, genealogy research, legal disputes, as art objects, and for tabletop gaming.

### *Changing user needs*

Through these avenues, as well as traditional collection purchasing and gifts, the Herman B Wells Library Map Collection grew to include many large topographic map series, geologic maps, pictorial tourist maps, and thematic maps published by government entities and individual publishers from around the world, as is typical of a large American research library map collection. However, in recent years collection development priorities have changed to focus more on the unique, the ephemeral, and the weird. This approach to collection development is closer to a special collections philosophy than to traditional cartographic research collections, yet it is one I believe is appropriate to current usage of the collection.

Where once the primary users of the map collection were geologists and geographers wanting current maps for field research, over the past ten years our usage statistics indicate that the map collection is much more frequently used for undergraduate instruction and historical research. Many of the major publishers of official topographic and geologic maps now publish online (and some exclusively online), all but eliminating the demand for the vast collection of geologic sheet maps in our drawers. Current national topographic map series are prohibitively expensive to purchase and used so infrequently that a "just in time" approach to collection development (purchasing based on specific user requests or programs) rather than a "just in case" method of collecting is more prudent, especially for areas outside the geographic strengths of Indiana University and the map collection. So, if we are not frequently purchasing these traditional sources of cartography... what are we buying?

### **A new approach to collection development**

#### *Fantasy Maps*

Recent "weird" acquisitions include a growing collection of fantasy maps, such as maps of the lands of Game of Thrones, Lord of the Rings, H.P. Lovecraft, Oz, Star Trek, and many others. There is a rich history of fantasy and science fiction maps in library collections. The Lilly Library, Indiana University's rare books, manuscripts, and special collections library, holds many examples of fantasy maps in books. The PJ Mode Collection of Persuasive Cartography at Cornell University contains maps of imaginary places alongside propaganda maps (*Persuasive Maps*, n.d.), and many other map collections include a selection of fantasy maps in their collections. Brett & Laddusaw assert that popular culture materials, including fantasy maps, "provide researchers with valuable opportunities for studying shifts in societal values, morals, and convictions" (2017, 283).

Indeed, in my experience teaching with fantasy maps, I've observed that these imaginary cartographies help students think about cartographic conventions divorced from actual landscapes. By juxtaposing maps of fictional lands and battles with maps showing historical military events, the notion that history and cartography are constructed becomes more apparent. Students in a class on military conflicts remarked how similar these maps looked to each other in that they employed similar cartographic style and language (Figure 1). They posited that historical battle maps are stories of the past, constructed in the same way that a fantasy map of fictional Westeros is drawn from stories and imagination. As a final assignment in this class, students create their own board game maps, inspired by maps from the collection; both fictional and historical.



Figure 1. Students examine fantasy maps of Westeros and Middle Earth with their professor in a library instruction session

### *Cartoon Indiana*

The 1946 postcard map of Indiana by Bill Skacel (Figure 2) is a humorous pictorial map showing common stereotypes of the state. It includes stereotypical and demeaning depictions of Native Americans that would have been common in the 1940's, among folksy images of Hoosiers (people from Indiana) enjoying the major tourist attractions of the state. Some of these landmarks include universities, the point of highest elevation, rivers, industry, and the motor speedway. The map is formatted as a postcard, with a space for postage so that visitors of the state could send a map



missive to friends and family members, effectively promoting the state to others. This lighthearted map is a snapshot of the dominant culture of the time and provides rich fodder for discussion for students. When teaching with this map, we often discuss what, if anything, has changed about the dominant stereotypes and caricatures of the state since 1948. Students are often shocked at the caricatures of Native Americans on the map and note that while this type of image is no longer appropriate or acceptable, some of the stereotypes and assumptions about Native Americans linger. Students are asked what they would choose to include on a postcard map of Indiana if they were cartographers, opening a dialog about the perspective and authority of a cartographer. While Skacel's map is an obviously subjective example, all maps are created by cartographers who make decisions about what goes on the map, and sometimes even more importantly, what does not. Similar to the fantasy maps, students studying an overtly persuasive map are more primed to critically assess cartographic materials than if the map that is perceived to be "neutral" or "scientific".



Figure 2. Bill Skacel's Cartoon Indiana. 1948

*Judgement Map of My Beloved Bloomington*

One of the most popular “weird” maps in the collection came from a viral post on Twitter (now X). A user called @Btownmoose (2022) posted a “Judgement Map” of Bloomington, the city that is home to Indiana University’s flagship campus and the map collection. This map is a screenshot of a digital map, layered over with brightly colored textual labels (see Figure 3). The *Judgement Map of My Beloved Bloomington* acts as an urban cartographic dictionary of insides jokes, stereotypes, and local references. Continuing the tradition of the joke map, the *Judgement Map* pokes fun at the dominant American college town culture of fraternities, partying, and college sports. The map has a very specific counterculture perspective of the working class townie that highlights the town & gown divide of the city. Labels such as “poor people lake”, “John Mellencamp’s rich people lake”, “PARENTS’ MONEY”, and “poor students” delineate economic sectors of the area, and “sportsland” effectively dismisses the importance of college sports culture. While somewhat haphazard in cartographic style, this map engages in place-making for a city with a transient student population and a high turnover of residents. This map is a fascinating view of a place that is absolutely not captured in traditional cartographic representations such as campus maps, city government maps, or even tourism maps of the area. It is not effective for navigation: businesses and tourist attractions are not mentioned by name, but rather described (“celebrity sandwich pedophile” is the Subway location that disgraced former spokesperson Jared Fogle frequented). The only location mentioned by name without commentary is the Office Lounge—a blue collar townie bar outside the center of town. The purpose of this map is to entertain and to lovingly describe a place from a specific point of view.

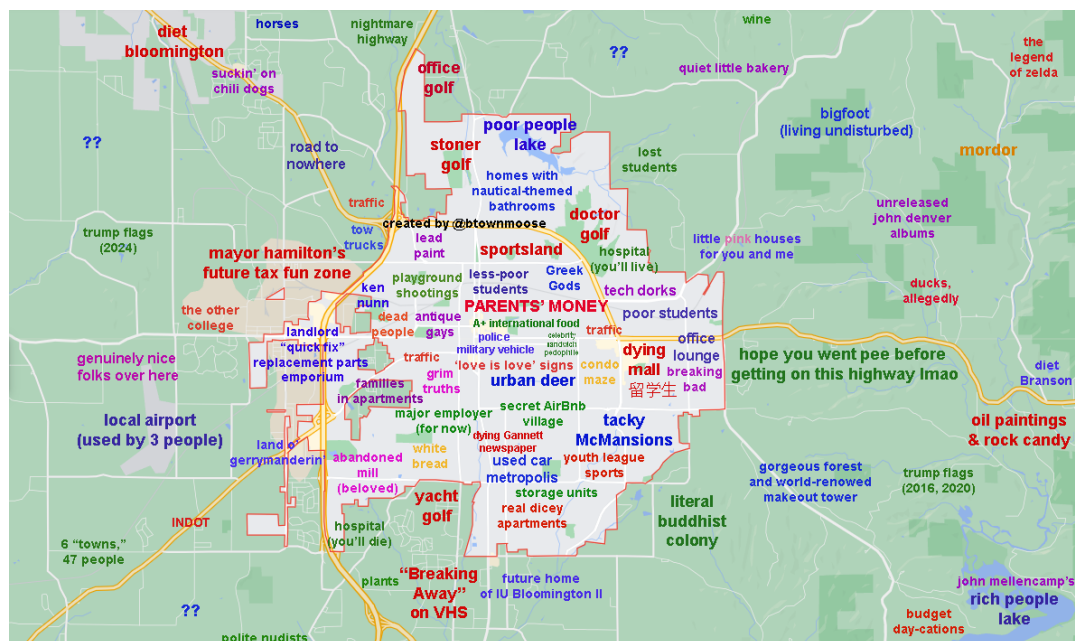


Figure 3: *Judgement Map of My Beloved Bloomington*, @Btownmoose, 2022

The collection process for the *Judgement Map* was an interesting one. After seeing the post online, the map cataloger and librarian messaged the cartographer on Twitter asking for permission to include the map in the library collection. The cartographer was happy to have the map included, and provided high resolution images of the map, as well as clarification on how they would like to be credited. Cartographic materials cataloger Ronda Sewald created a record (Figure 4) that included

this information and linked to the original post. We printed the maps and filed them in the map collection. The digital version of the map will be added to Digital Collections once the platform migration is complete.

<b>[Judgment map of my beloved Bloomington] : [Indiana]</b>	
Author/Composer, etc	<a href="#">btownmoose (Pseudonym)</a> , cartographer.
Title	[Judgment map of my beloved Bloomington] : [Indiana] / [mooser].
Format	 Map
Published/Produced	[Bloomington, Ind.] [Twitter]. [2022]
Physical description	1 map : color ; on sheet 22 x 28 cm
URL	<a href="https://twitter.com/btownmoose/status/1516870811646406656/">https://twitter.com/btownmoose/status/1516870811646406656/</a> - (Original Twitter thread)
Mathematic map d...	Scale not determined (W 86°39'15"--W 86°22'30"/N 39°13'45"--N 39°06'00").
Other title	[Bloomington-Map]
Notes	Title derived from creator's Twitter feed; alternative title from author's upload to imgbb. Map posted to Twitter 4:05 PM, Apr 20, 2022.
Summary	Map with alternative place names used for neighborhoods and other areas within Bloomington, Indiana, and surrounding area.
Subject	<a href="#">Names, Geographical--Indiana--Bloomington--Maps.</a> <a href="#">Names, Geographical--Indiana--Bloomington Region--Maps.</a> <a href="#">Wit and humor, Pictorial--Maps.</a> <a href="#">Bloomington (Ind.)--Maps.</a>
Genre heading	Maps.

Figure 4. Screenshot of the catalog record for the *Judgement Map of Bloomington*. <https://iucacat.iu.edu/catalog/19468258>

### *Soviet Maps of United States Cities*

Russian topographic maps may not technically qualify as “weird”, yet they offer an unfamiliar perspective for many American students. Indiana University has long held a large collection of Russian topographic maps of Eastern Europe produced in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. These maps have been digitized and are frequently used in research and instruction. Adding to that collection is a selection of Russian topographic maps from the Cold War era that depict cities in the United States. These maps are prints from scanned maps that were purchased from East View Geospatial. The prints are not especially high quality, and the ink has a tendency to smear, so we have encapsulated these sheets in mylar for use in instruction. Unlike the previous examples, these maps are standard “scientific” topographic maps, yet they challenge and disorient students who are not used to seeing their cities mapped in the Russian language. Although most undergraduate students in 2024 were born many years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Cold War era imagery of the Soviet Union remains relevant in popular culture, films, and tv shows and evokes an air of paranoia and danger, particularly when seeing one’s hometown mapped from a Soviet perspective. In 2018 Kent & Hopstock conducted an exercise that divided participants into three groups, each with a different map of Washington D.C. They noted that the group navigating with a Soviet map “identified buildings and places that were important targets for the Soviet Union at the time of Cold War. They started to look at the surroundings from the viewpoint of possible targets”(Kent & Hopfstock, 2018, p. 90). Indeed, I have observed that students working with these maps often struggle to orient themselves at first, but then tend to remark on the buildings and areas that appear with visual prominence as they speculate as to why Russian cartographers might have an interest in the infrastructure of small American cities (see Figure 5).



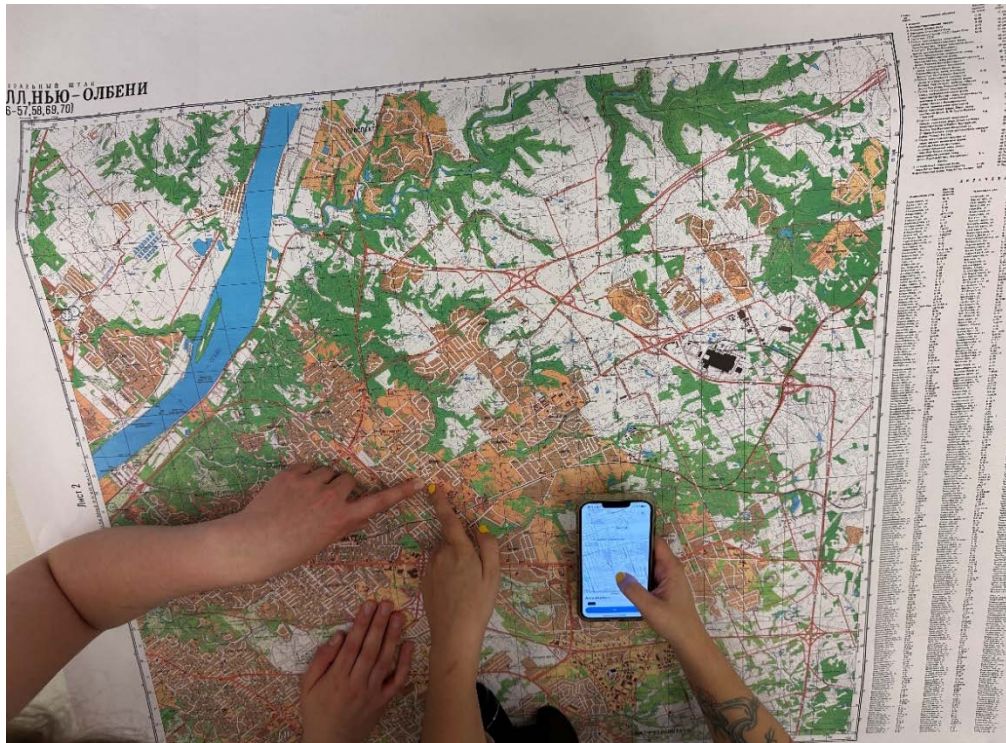


Figure 5. American students identify familiar locations on a Soviet map of Louisville.

## Challenges

### *Harmful Language*

Increasing the collection of weird and ephemeral maps effectively meets the demands and the interests of modern users of the map collection. However, these collections present some unique challenges for a collection manager. One characteristic of pictorial and persuasive maps is provocative imagery. Often this means that a historical map includes images, usually of specific ethnic groups, that in a modern context are obviously racist and/or offensive. These maps are important for historical research and for capturing attitudes about places and peoples. However, additional context is needed when presenting these maps. During instruction sessions I offer a verbal disclaimer that some of the maps contain offensive imagery, and we discuss the historical context and significance together. A Harmful Language Statement accompanies maps in Indiana University's digital collections, stating, "We are committed to upholding the description of archival materials and special collections in a respectful and accurate manner while maintaining the historical context of the collections we manage. However, the materials we describe are not neutral. Users may encounter offensive, harmful, or otherwise outdated language in archival materials and special collections." (Digital Collections Services, Indiana University Libraries, 2021). To date, no similar disclaimer exists for users browsing the physical map collection. Most maps that contain harmful language or imagery are kept in locked cabinets, though this is not always the case. Ongoing efforts to organize and weed the collection should decrease the number of offensive maps in open shelving.

### *Usage rights and metadata*

Weird maps are not always straightforward to describe. Aside from issues of harmful language discussed above, internet meme maps and tourist brochures usually do not include the detailed

metadata that accompanies maps purchased from major vendors. In the case of the *Judgement Map*, Ronda Seward, Cartographic Images Cataloger, took pains to create a catalog record from a tweet and was diligent about capturing details and context in the catalog record. Librarians also made sure to contact the cartographer to request a full resolution image and inform them that their map was being added to the collection. While this represented an ideal example of working directly with a cartographer (creator?), this is not always possible when attempting to collect internet meme maps of murky provenance.

### *Time and Space*

It takes more time and effort to hunt down weird maps. You cannot look to traditional map vendors or to programs like the FDLP or approval plans. Ephemeral maps collected from the internet or otherwise born-digital require a digital image repository home with digital preservation safeguards in place. At Indiana University we have a platform called Digital Collections that hosts image files and associated metadata for viewing. However, this platform does not offer users the option to download a high-resolution image. Viewing images is usually sufficient for users of photograph collections, whereas map users more often require a high-resolution download to use maps in Geographic Information Systems (GIS). Therefore, we have a redundant system where digitized maps are also deposited into IU Datacore; a data repository that allows for file downloads but not viewing. Copyright for internet meme maps can also be complicated, which has slowed collection efforts in this area. We have future plans to work with the Copyright Librarian to develop a program for collecting and printing ephemeral maps, but for now we use a similar process to accepting gifts, wherein the donor/cartographer agrees to allow use of their work.

### **Conclusion**

The maps described in this paper bring to the surface the critical elements of cartography. Questions of authority, accuracy, and relevance take on different meanings outside of the traditional topographic or reference map context. Showing students a view of a familiar landscape that is unexpected makes them question the assumptions they've held about place and about cartographic conventions. Weird maps help to spark conversations and engage students, whether the map shows a familiar land from a favorite television show, or an unfamiliar view of home. These unusual maps offer an entry point to cartographic collections and are worth the additional challenges of collection development.

### **References**

- [btownmoose]. (2022). *we had some fun with a judgment map of Indiana. now, here's a judgment map of my beloved Bloomington*: [image attached][post]. X. <https://x.com/btownmoose/status/1516870811646406656/?prefetchTimestamp=1721925408690>
- Andrew, P. G., McElfresh, L. K., & Musser, L. R. (2021). "Will Work for Maps": A History of the Library of Congress Geography and Map Division Special Map Processing Project. *Journal of Map & Geography Libraries*, 16(2), 194–223. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15420353.2021.1923611>
- Brett, J., & Laddusaw, S. (2017). Touring Fantasyland: The "Maps of Imaginary Places" Collection and Exhibit at Cushing Memorial Library and Archives. *Journal of Map & Geography Libraries*, 13(3), 280–299. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15420353.2017.1353473>



Digital Collections Services, Indiana University Libraries. (2021, October 19). *Harmful Language Statement / Indiana University Libraries*. <https://libraries.indiana.edu/harmful-language-statement>

*Federal Depository Library Program*. (n.d.). Retrieved July 11, 2024, from <https://www.gpo.gov/how-to-work-with-us/agency/services-for-agencies/federal-depository-library-program>

Kent, A. J., & Hopfstock, A. (2018). How Topographic Maps Affect: Experiencing Washington, DC through the Maps of the “Other.” *Cartographic Perspectives*, 91, Art. 91. <https://doi.org/10.14714/CP91.1459>

*Persuasive Maps / Persuasive Maps*. (n.d.). Retrieved July 25, 2024, from <https://persuasivemaps.library.cornell.edu/>

Quill, T., & Dalmau, M. (2019). Capture and Release: The Story of the Russian Military Topographic Map Collection. *Cartographic Perspectives*, 93, Art. 93. <https://doi.org/10.14714/CP93.1567>

Skacel, Bill. (1946?). *Bill Skacel's Cartoon Indiana* [map]. Scale not given. Milwaukee, Wisconsin: E.C. Kropp Co.