SOFTWARE & TECH

What Is A Paper Town

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Introduction: The Cartographic Mystery of the Paper Town

Imagine driving down a quiet country road, your GPS confidently directing you toward a town that, according to your map, should be just over the next hill. You arrive at the coordinates only to find an empty field, a grove of trees, or perhaps a single, lonely farmhouse. There is no gas station, no post office, no cluster of houses. You have just discovered a **paper town**. These fictional settlements, also known as phantom settlements, trap streets, or cartographic frauds, are deliberate errors inserted into maps to protect the copyright of mapmakers. But their story is far more complex, blending history, law, and human curiosity. In this article, we will explore exactly **what is a paper town**, why they exist, how they have evolved, and why they still captivate us today.

Defining the Paper Town: More Than Just a Mistake

At its core, a **paper town**is a fictional settlement or geographic feature that appears on a map but does not exist in reality. Unlike a simple error or outdated information, a paper town is a deliberate fabrication. Mapmakers create these phantoms for a very specific reason: to protect their intellectual property.

Maps are incredibly expensive and time-consuming to produce. For centuries, cartographers spent years surveying land, drawing coastlines, and recording place names. Once a map was published, competitors could easily copy it, reproducing the same features without doing any original work. To catch these copycats, mapmakers began planting traps. A paper town was one of the most effective traps. If a rival map included the same fictional town, the original cartographer had undeniable proof of copyright infringement. These phantom settlements are also called trap streets, particularly when referring to a fabricated street on a city map, but the concept is identical.

The Difference Between a Paper Town and a Cartographic Error

It is important to distinguish a **paper town** from a genuine mistake. Cartographic errors happen all the time: a surveyor misjudges a distance, a name is misspelled, or a feature is omitted. These are unintentional. A paper town, however, is a conscious, calculated fiction. It is a weapon in a legal battle, a silent sentinel protecting the mapmaker labor. When we ask **what is a paper town**, we must understand that it is not a bug—it is a feature by design.

- Paper town: A deliberate, fictitious settlement created to detect copyright theft.
- Cartographic error: An unintentional mistake caused by faulty data or human oversight.
- Phantom settlement: A broader term that can include both deliberate fabrications and outdated settlements that no longer exist.
- Trap street: A fictitious street inserted into a city map, serving the same purpose as a paper town.

Understanding this distinction is the first step to grasping the full significance of these fictional places.

A Brief History of Tricking Map Thieves

The practice of inserting deliberate errors into maps is centuries old. One of the earliest and most famous examples comes from the 1930s. Otto G. Lindberg and Ernest Alpers, founders of the General Drafting Company, created a map of New York State. They inserted a tiny, fictional hamlet at the intersection of two dirt roads in Sullivan County. They named it Agloe.

Agloe was a pure invention, a trap. Years later, the Rand McNally company published a map that included Agloe. The General Drafting Company threatened legal action, assuming Rand McNally had copied their work. However, something unexpected had happened. A general store had been built at the location of the fictional Agloe, and the store owners had named their business the "Agloe General Store." The name had, in a sense, become real. Rand McNally argued that they had not copied the name from General Drafting but had accurately recorded a real place. This case became legendary in cartographic history, a perfect illustration of how a **paper town** could, over time, bleed into reality.

The Golden Age of Paper Towns

The 20th century was the golden age for these cartographic traps. Before GPS and satellite imagery, maps were the final authority on geography. Mapmakers competed fiercely, and copyright infringement was rampant. Every major map publisher had its own collection of trap streets and paper towns. Some were simple, like a nonexistent lane in a housing development. Others were elaborate, like entire ghost towns in the desert. The goal was always the same: create something plausible enough to be copied, but false enough to be indefensible in court.

The game was sophisticated. Cartographers knew that rival companies would not copy every single feature; they would selectively lift data. So, a good trap had to be in an inconspicuous location. It had to look ordinary. A town named *Beaty* or *Lipton*in a rural area might go unnoticed for years. The best paper towns were boring, and that was exactly the point.

Famous Examples of Paper Towns Around the World

While Agloe is the most celebrated case, it is far from the only one. **Paper towns**appear on maps across the globe. Each one has a story to tell about the mapmaker who created it and the rival who copied it.

Argleton, West Lancashire, England

Perhaps the most famous modern example in the United Kingdom is **Argleton**. This phantom settlement appeared on Google Maps for years on a patch of empty land near Ormskirk in Lancashire. It had a name, a location, and even a small cluster of pins associated with it, but it did not exist. Online, people found listings for an "Argleton" business, though none could be located physically. The name itself is thought to be an anagram of "not real" plus a "g" (some say "Notreal G" or "Not a real G" - though "Notreal G" is close to "Not Real G," and "Argleton" anagrams to "Not Large" but also "Not Real G" with a rearrangement). More convincingly, "Argleton" is likely a variant of "trap" concepts. Whatever the origin, Argleton became a media sensation, a digital-age echo of the old paper town tradition. It was eventually removed from Google Maps, but its legend persists. The case of Argleton shows that the concept of **what is a paper town**has seamlessly transitioned into the digital world.

Other Notable Phantom Settlements

- Sandy Island, New Caledonia: This phantom island appeared on maps for over a century and even on Google Earth. It was shown as a dark, oblong shape in the Coral Sea. In 2012, Australian scientists sailed to its coordinates and found only ocean. It was an error that likely originated from a misreported sighting, rather than a deliberate trap, but it illustrates how persistent these myths can be.
- Bermuda Triangle of the North: Some maps of the Great Lakes include fictional islands, again as copyright traps.

- Trap Streets in London: The famous "A to Z" map of London is known to have contained trap streets. One well-known example is the inclusion of a street called "Way" in the Barbican area that doesn't exist, or the deliberate misalignment of a road.
- Mount Richard, Colorado: A fictional peak in Rocky Mountain National Park, created as a trap by a mapmaker. It was later found to correspond to the real location of another peak, but the name was fictional.

These examples show that paper towns are not confined to one country or one era. They are a global phenomenon, a testament to the lengths cartographers will go to protect their work.

How Paper Towns Protect Copyright (And Why They Still Matter)

The legal principle behind the **paper town**is straightforward. Copyright law protects creative works. A map is a creative work in the sense that it involves selection, arrangement, and presentation of data. A fictional entry is a creative element. If a competing map contains the same fictional entry, the original creator can prove that the competitor copied their work. It is a fingerprint for plagiarism.

This approach is not limited to maps. The same technique is used in directories, dictionaries, and even telephone books. A fictional listing, often called a "mountweazel" (named after a fictional entry in the New Columbia Encyclopedia for the fictitious Lillian Virginia Mountweazel), serves the same purpose. In cartography, the paper town is the most iconic form of this trap.

The Decline of Traditional Paper Towns

With the rise of digital maps and satellite imagery, the traditional paper town has become less effective. Google Maps, Apple Maps, and OpenStreetMap rely on a combination of official data, user contributions, and satellite photographs. If a map shows a town that does not exist, users will quickly notice and report it. Satellite imagery provides a level of ground-truthing that did not exist in the age of paper. A phantom settlement cannot hide from a satellite photo for long.

However, the practice has not disappeared. It has evolved. Digital map companies still contend with copyright and data scraping. They use different techniques now, such as inserting small errors in road geometry, adding minor distortions, or creating fake points of interest. These are the digital descendants of the paper town. They serve the same purpose: to detect unauthorized copying.

Paper Towns in Popular Culture: From Cartography to Literature

The concept of the **paper town** has permeated popular culture, most notably in John Green's 2008 novel *Paper Towns*. The book follows a teenager named Quentin who embarks on a road trip to find his missing neighbor, Margo, who has left a trail of clues related to paper towns. The novel uses the idea of a fictional, unreal place as a metaphor for the way we idealize and misunderstand other people.

The success of *Paper Towns*(and the 2015 film adaptation) brought the term into the mainstream. For millions of readers, the phrase "paper town" is now associated with a story of mystery and teenage love. The novel also sparked a real-world interest in finding actual paper towns. Fans of the book have traveled to coordinates of known phantom settlements, trying to connect with the story in a tangible way. This cultural moment shows how a niche cartographic term can become a powerful literary symbol.

The Enduring Fascination with Phantom Places

Why do we care about places that do not exist? The answer lies in human psychology. There is something deeply romantic and mysterious about a town on a map that you can never visit. It is a ghost, a shadow of a place. It represents the edge of knowledge, the boundary between what is known and what is imagined.

For some, paper towns are a hobby. Geographers and map enthusiasts search for them, compiling lists of

phantom settlements and debating which are deliberate traps and which are errors. For others, they are a warning. They remind us that maps are not perfect mirrors of reality. They are human artifacts, full of what is a paper towns deliberate fiction? The question and representation. Who decides what goes on the map? And what happens when we trust a map too blindly?

In a world dominated by GPS and digital navigation, the idea of a fictional place feels almost quaint. Yet, the modern mapping ecosystem has its own version of paper towns. Fake listings on Google Maps, such as

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