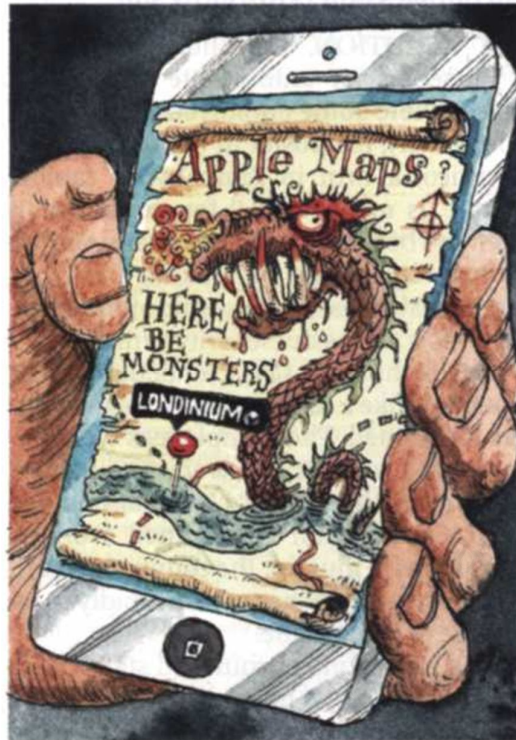


Lost

The criticism heaped on Apple shows the growing importance of cartography



Old hands at The Economist have fond memories of Mokaris, a cafe near our office in St James's. There was nothing fancy about the food, the prices or the service. Mokaris closed in 2005, and Franco's, the smarter Italian restaurant next door, expanded to take over the premises. But in the parallel universe of the iPhone, hungry hacks can still enjoy an omelette and chips for around a fiver. Mokaris is still on the map—at least, the map on Apple's new mobile operating system, ios 6.

Apple's mobile maps used to be supplied by its friend-turned-archrival, Google. But this year Apple decided to put maps of its own into ios 6, rather than be beholden to its foe. The new maps are built into the iPhone 5, which went on sale on September 21st, and appear when older devices are upgraded to ios 6. The internet has been teeming with complaints about a lack of detail and a surfeit of errors. And unlike Google's maps, Apple's lack public-transport information.

Maps are becoming important strategic terrain. They are more than an aid to getting from a to b. Apps based on location—to summon a taxi, say—need maps inside them. Digital maps can include countless layers of information, plus advertisements from which money can be made. There are thousands of indoor maps, too, of airports, department stores and so forth. Smartphones also act as sensors, reporting their whereabouts, which can be used to improve maps. According to comScore, a data firm, in August 95% of American iPhone owners and 83% of owners of smartphones with Google's Android operating system used a mobile map.

Being chucked off the iPhone is thus a blow to Google, though it may be enjoying Apple's discomfiture. It could return by making a new maps app, which would have to be approved by Apple. Its chairman, Eric Schmidt, said on September 25th that it had "not done anything yet".

Creating good maps demands a lot of time and money. Google has taken about eight years to build up its expertise: it has sent cars along the world's roads and maintains a fleet of aeroplanes. Nokia's mappers (who have been issuing reminders that they offer web-based

maps for the iPhone) have a longer pedigree still. Apple, which has bought three mapmaking firms in the past three years and is supplied with data by TomTom, a Dutch company, has plenty of money to throw at catching up on maps, but it will take time. "Over two to three years," estimates Martin Garner of CCS Insight, a research firm, "Apple can get up to good enough."

Meanwhile, Apple seems to be relying on three things. The first is speedy improvement. (It is reportedly trying to hire ex-Googlers.) The second is the embedding of useful content. Its new maps have spoken turn-by-turn driving directions, which Google's version for the iPhone did not, as well as reviews from Yelp, a local-listings company that offers pretty full coverage of eateries and bars in America but much less elsewhere.

The third is the loyalty of Apple's fans. More than 5m iPhone 5s were sold in the first three days. Although some analysts had expected more, that still beat the previous version, the 4s, by 1m.

Under the late Steve Jobs Apple paid fanatical attention to detail, so it is remarkable that its maps should have come up so short. But polishing its hardware was one thing; the struggle with maps "has been the first really obvious head-butting of the wall," says Carolina Milanesi of Gartner, another research firm. Past perfectionism over devices has won it time to improve its maps. In a market in which brands can fall fast, that is a rare luxury.

Fonte: The Economist, London, v. 404, n. 8804, p. 69-70, 29 Set. a 5 Oct. 2012.

A utilização deste artigo é exclusiva para fins acadêmicos.