

URL: <https://stvp.stanford.edu/clips/a-love-for-real-time-data>

Square and Twitter Co-Founder Jack Dorsey shares his childhood experience of falling in love with maps, while growing up in St. Louis, Missouri. Dorsey taught himself to program computers because he wanted to design maps, an activity that led to his deeper exploration of dispatch software development. Dorsey describes his early exposure to data visualization as, the "most beautiful thing that I could visualize, a city living and breathing."



Transcript

When I was growing up, But it was still a joy and a wonder to me.. You had skyscrapers and you had all of this hidden energy.. Just walking around, you could feel something different.. That sort of love and that obsession was made most tangible by maps.. I became obsessed by maps and looking at them.. I bought every Rand McNally and every single map that I could find.. I would put them in my room and hang them all over the walls and just look at them and wonder what was happening at this particular intersection or in this area or how to get down this road most efficiently.. My parents didn't know what to make of it but I loved it.. In 1984-1985 we got the first Mackintosh and an IBM PC Junior.. I really wanted to play more with maps..

I wanted to see them.. I wanted to alter them more and do it on the computer screen.. So, I taught myself how to program because I wanted to learn how to draw a map on the screen.. And then, I accomplished that.. It was very, very basic and very simple.. And then, I put some dots on the map.. And then, I learned how to move the dots around.. Then, the next challenge was to figure out how to keep the dots on the streets because they were going all over the place.. And then, I had all these dots moving around this beautiful picture of this map, which represented downtown St.. Louis and then later represented New York City, which I was amazed by..

The issue was that none of the dots had any meaning whatsoever.. They're just random dots moving around this city.. My parents had a CB radio and they had a police scanner.. And what was happening on the police scanner was really interesting because you had ambulances and fire trucks and police cars constantly reporting where they are and what they're doing.. So, I'm at Fifth in Broadway in New York City.. I have a patient in cardiac arrest and we're going to St.. John's Mercy.. And I could take that information, type it up into a program, make some assumptions about speed and direction and what routes they're going to take and actually watch the ambulance go to St.. John's Mercy.. Then, I could hook up another ambulance and a taxicab, a police car, a fire truck..

The more and more of this I did, the more I learned how to automate more of it because the Internet was just coming up.. We had Gopher and St.. Louis, Missouri, has a school named Washington University, which was one of the first backbones for the Internet.. So, we had a pretty good connection to the BBS systems, the bulletin board systems, back then.. I found all these databases of this information, although this was after the fact.. But it was still interesting to watch and to see unfold.. So, now I had this picture of real-live data of a real-life city operating in front of me.. And I just thought it was the most beautiful thing ever that I could visualize, a city living and breathing...