

Ten Telltale Signs of Novice Cartography

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Abstract:

A telltale is a small flag on a sailboat that indicates the flow of air over the sail (figure 1). The flags perform an important function as they provide an immediate and accurate indication of optimum sail trim (that is, the angle of the sail compared to wind direction) and course to steer (Jasper, 1987). As a consequence, they are the most important thing for the helmsperson and crew to watch.



Figure 1. Red telltales on a sailboat (courtesy Aaron Jasper).

In English, the idiom "telltale sign" means "an indication of something that has happened or exists, sometimes allowing a secret to be known" (Longman, 2019). An example is use of an N-shaped line symbol in a legend to indicate that ArcGIS software was used to make the map (figure 2). This cartographic convention was not often used before the software introduced this option as the default method for displaying line items in a legend. Most traditionally-trained map makers would not use this approach, so it became one way to identify the work of a generation of newer map makers who used default software settings even if they wanted others to think they were experienced map makers.

Key to Symbols










-  Limited Access Highway
-  Highway
-  Major Road
-  Local Road
-  Minor Road
-  Other Road
-  Ramp
-  Ferry
-  Pedestrian Way

Figure 2. N-shaped line symbols in a map legend.

In this paper, "a telltale sign of novice cartography" provides evidence of map making by someone who is still learning the best or correct way to make maps. It can be thought of as a typical cartographic blunder by a person who makes maps but does not fully know yet what she or he is doing. These telltale signs can help map makers to know what pitfalls to avoid when making maps, they can help educators to know what to teach when instructing others how to make maps, and they can help map readers to know what to look for to determine the veracity of a map. They can, in a sense, reveal secrets about the ability of the map maker.

Through an informal email by this paper's author, nearly 150 cartographers worldwide from academia, government, and the private sector were asked to submit their own list of telltale signs of novice cartography. They were asked to share ten things they think of as signs that a map was made by someone who is still learning or perhaps has failed to learn. The cartographers were not asked to rank the items in the list, nor were they required to provide exactly ten items in the list—in fact, some offered more than ten items, and some offered fewer.

Nearly 100 responses were received as of January 1, 2019. The responses were compiled into a single text document. Content analysis was used to analyse the responses by interpreting and coding the text. Additional responses continue to arrive—those responses will also be analysed.

The final results of this analysis will be revealed at the International Cartographic Conference in 2019. The data will then be made available to others to explore and analyse.

References:

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