

COMMUNICATIONS SERVER APPARATUS AND METHODS OF OPERATION THEREOF**Technical Field**

The invention relates generally to the field of communications. One aspect of the invention relates to a communications server apparatus for generating navigable map data. Another aspect of the invention relates to a method, performed in a communications server apparatus for generating navigable map data. Other aspects of the invention relate to a computer program product or a computer program comprising instructions for implementing a method of generating navigable map data. Another aspect of the invention relates to a non-transitory storage medium storing instructions, which when executed by a processor, cause the processor to perform a method of generating navigable map data.

One aspect of the invention has particular, but not exclusive, application in the generation of maps which are navigable by pedestrians. This allows for navigable maps to be built using crowd sourced satellite navigation measurements from user communication devices, like mobile smartphones.

Background

Accurate and complete road maps play an important role in navigation and localisation applications. With the emergence of autonomous driving and ride-hailing, extensive efforts have been devoted to improving existing road networks by correcting errors and updating new roads. With the popularity of satellite navigation devices such as car global navigation satellite system (GNSS) receivers, including hardware and software components providing this functionality in user communications devices like smartphones, automatic map inference using crowdsourcing satnav measurements has attracted interest, as it may enable map generation with high efficiency, high accuracy and low labour cost. With decades of development in both academia and industrial communities, automatic map inference development still however faces significant challenges due to satnav noise

and low sampling rate for devices like smartphones, and it almost solely focused on vehicle road networks as which the availability and quality of satnav traces from in-car satnav systems is much higher.

- 5 It is clear that nowadays mobile users spend an increasing proportion of their time indoors; for example, passengers using ride-hailing apps need to be navigated to the meeting place with the driver, the pickup point, and delivery personnel (e.g. food, packages) need to be navigated to the correct pick up points (e.g. restaurants, office). Therefore, pedestrian walkable maps may be useful in such applications, but
10 unfortunately, very few solutions have been developed for this problem.

Most existing techniques are for vehicle networks using GPS pings from moving vehicles. In such cases, GPS signals are more accurate and use of with high accuracy. The earliest work in academia uses k-means techniques to cluster nearby pings in
15 satnav traces [1,2,3,4], and another group of research work adopts trace merge by identifying and clustering nearby traces [5,6,7]. Both groups of work are suitable for high quality satnav measurements, which present clear and sufficiently dense traces. Another group of work applies kernel density estimation (KDE) to convert satnav measurements into density images and extract roads as the centreline of the most
20 condensed area [8, 9,10]. The KDE method could be considered to handle satnav noise better but still requires the existence of a clear road separation. A more recent method [12,13] proposes first to identify road intersections and then infer the road by connecting intersections. Such methods are only applicable to maps like road network with strict line constraints.

- 25 A list of known academic literature on map inference from satnav probe data is listed in the references section. There are works related to pedestrian satnav [14,15,16], but none of them aim to build a complete map like a complete walkable map for pedestrians. [14,15] are essentially based on the trace merge algorithm, and [16]
30 only identify hot spots on the map.

While inferring motorable roads and pedestrian paths fall under the broad category of map inference using GPS, the inference of pedestrian walkable map has distinct differences from that of vehicle road network.

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1. Crowdsourcing satnav measurements from pedestrian mobile phones – such as those taken from a location-sensitive apps resident on the phone and then transmitted over a network to the app service provider's back end – have lower accuracy and lower sampling rates than those from car satnav devices.

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Clear traces are not hence readily available from such low-quality pings, which is however one of the most important assumptions for both k-means and trace merging methods. It can be shown that even the lower-quality satnav measurements from existing work exhibits relatively clear traces, while a major amount of pedestrian satnav measurements show scattering.

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Existing algorithms based on KDE are designed to be noise robust, but it requires very dense sampling points so that the density estimation can achieve good performance, which makes it not directly suitable for applications which might wish to make user of such crowd sourced satnav measurements.

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2. Pedestrians tend to walk randomly and take shortcuts, especially in open areas, and hence road restrictions that are normally useful in vehicle road networks cannot be easily applied. The most recent algorithms using road intersection cannot be used.

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Summary

Aspects of the invention are as set out in the independent claims. Some optional features are defined in the dependent claims.

Implementation of the techniques disclosed herein may provide significant technical advantages. For instance, the techniques may facilitate generation of navigable map

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data from low-quality geolocation measurements as typical generated from user communication devices such as mobile telephones.

The techniques follow a three-step framework, each of which may be provided
5 independently, to convert scattered low-quality geolocation transmissions into a routable map which may be used by, for example, pedestrians or road traffic users. Stated at high-level, these techniques allow for generation of journey trace datasets derived from geolocation/satnav measurements in the users' mobile telephones, with the techniques being robust against noise, transforming low-quality
10 measurements into usable traces with properties similar to higher-quality in-vehicle satnav equipment. Then, these techniques allow extraction of navigable routes from the journey trace datasets, thus further reducing noise and merging plural journey traces along the same route. Then, the navigable routes are converted into navigable map data.

15 The techniques take advantage of the knowledge of the starting and destination locations for user journeys. The techniques may implement a weighted the shortest path determination between two such points, leading to efficient and accurate route finding and removing the necessity of, for example, pruning as in existing map
20 inference techniques.

Key aspects of the described innovations include the integration of the merits of KDE-based algorithm and trace merge algorithm and proposes a three-step framework which is robust against noise and with high inference accuracy. The
25 techniques explore the information of the start point and destination point of user, for example pedestrian, trips to extract walking traces of high quality. This extra information helps us to resolve the issue of sparse data such that a clear trace can be extracted even when only a handful of GPS pings are available.

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Brief Description of the Drawings

The invention will now be described, by way of example only, and with reference to the accompanying drawings in which:

- Figure 1 is a schematic block diagram illustrating a first exemplary communications system, in particular a communications server apparatus for generating navigable map data;
- Figure 2 is a screenshot illustrating crowd sourced satellite navigation transmissions from users' mobile communications devices;
- Figure 3 is a series of schematic diagrams illustrating one technique used by the communications server apparatus of Figure 1 in generating journey trace data sets;
- Figure 4 is a series of schematic diagrams illustrating another technique used by the communications server apparatus of Figure 1 in generating journey trace data sets;
- Figure 5 is a screenshot illustrating journey trace data sets generated by the communications server apparatus of Figure 1 rendered in image form;
- Figure 6 is a flow diagram illustrating the techniques of Figures 3 and 4 in generating journey trace data sets;
- Figure 7 is a series of schematic diagrams illustrating one technique used by the communications server apparatus of Figure 1 in generating route image data comprising data representing a network of navigable routes;
- Figure 8 is a flow diagram illustrating the techniques described with reference to Figure 7 in generating route image data;
- Figure 9 is a screenshot illustrating route image data derived using the techniques described herein;
- Figure 10 is a flow diagram illustrating the techniques for generation of the navigable map data;
- Figure 11 is a screenshot illustrating navigable map data generated according to the techniques described herein; and
- Figure 12 is a block diagram illustrating an overview of the techniques described with reference to Figures 1 – 11.

Detailed Description

Unless stated otherwise, terms such as “first” and “second”, where used, are used to distinguish between the elements such terms describe. Thus, these terms are not necessarily intended to indicate temporal or other prioritisation of such elements.

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Exemplary Definitions

One trip: A sequence of raw geolocation transmissions collected from one user in a particular trip from one location to another.

One journey trace: A sequence of location points from one location A to another location B; the trace is typically smooth and consisting of geolocation transmissions at location points from either one user trip or multiple trips from A to B. Two journey traces can overlap completely.

One navigable route: A sequence of geolocation points from one location A to another location B; the route may be smooth and consist of points derived from multiple walking traces. It is preferred that two navigable routes do not completely overlap.

A navigable map: A routable map consisting of multiple navigable routes. A straight path is represented by a straight line with two end nodes, and a curved path is composed of multiple connected straight lines. Routing can be achieved by connecting points and lines between any two geolocation points on the map.

Referring initially to Figure 1, a communications system 100 is illustrated.

Communications system 100 comprises communications server apparatus 102, user communications device 104 and user communications device 106. These devices are connected in the communications network 108 (for example the Internet) through respective communications links 110, 112, 114 implementing, for example, internet communications protocols. Communications devices 104, 106 may be able to communicate through other communications networks, such as a global navigation satellite system (GNSS) network 108a, and public switched telephone networks (PSTN networks), such as cellular communications network 108b.

Communications server apparatus 102 may be a single server as illustrated schematically in Figure 1, or have the functionality performed by the server apparatus 102 distributed across multiple server components. In the example of

5 Figure 1, communications server apparatus 102 may comprise a number of individual components including, but not limited to, one or more microprocessors 116, a memory 118 (e.g. a volatile memory such as a RAM) for the loading of executable instructions 120, the executable instructions defining the functionality the server apparatus 102 carries out under control of the processor 116. Communications

10 server apparatus 102 also comprises an input/output module 122 allowing the server to communicate over the communications networks 108, 108a, 108b. User interface 124 is provided for user control and may comprise, for example, computing peripheral devices such as display monitors, computer keyboards and the like. Server apparatus 102 also comprises a database 126, the purpose of which will become

15 readily apparent from the following discussion.

User communications device 104 may comprise a number of individual components including, but not limited to, one or more microprocessors 128, a memory 130 (e.g. a volatile memory such as a RAM) for the loading of executable instructions 132, the

20 executable instructions defining the functionality the user communications device 104 carries out under control of the processor 128. User communications device 104 also comprises an input/output module 134 allowing the user communications device 104 to communicate over the communications network 108. User interface 136 is provided for user control. If the user communications device 104 is, say, a

25 smart phone or tablet device, the user interface 136 will have a touch panel display as is prevalent in many smart phone and other handheld devices. User communications device 104 also comprises satnav components 138, which allow user communications device to conduct a measurement or at least approximate the geolocation of user communications device 104 by receiving timing signals from

GSSN satellites 140 through GSSN network 108a using communications channels 142, 144 as is known.

User communications device 106 may be, for example, a smart phone or tablet device with the same or a similar hardware architecture to that of user communications device 104. User communications device 106, has, amongst other things, user interface 136 in the form of a touchscreen display and satnav components 138. User communications device 106 is able to communicate with cellular network base stations 146 through cellular telecommunications network 108b using channels 148, 150. User communications device 106 is able to approximate its geolocation by receiving timing signals from the cellular network base stations 146 through cellular telecommunications network 108b as is known. Of course, user communications device 104 may also be able to approximate its geolocation by receiving timing signals from the cellular network base stations 146 and user communications device 106 may be able to approximate its geolocation by receiving timing signals from the GSSN satellites 140, but these arrangements are omitted from Figure 1 for the sake of simplicity.

Figure 2 provides an illustration of a pattern of crowdsourced satnav geolocation measurements as measured by the users' mobile phones and interfacing with satnav components 138 and then transmitted to communications server apparatus 102. In this example, the transmissions of the geolocation measurements have been generated from ride-hailing apps resident on users' mobile phones while they are using the app, for instance while making a booking for a vehicle to pick them up. The geolocation transmissions are transmitted by the users' mobile phone apps as the users journey from the geographic locations at which they had been located at the time they made the bookings to a rendezvous point with the driver, the "pickup point" from which the driver will drive them to their ultimate destinations. Such geolocation measurements determined in mobile phones and transmitted by the ride-hailing apps are, as noted above, typically of low-precision, with the "ping"

period typically being set at around one minute. So, data from each user is sparse and often not particularly accurate. However, and as can be seen, and as noted above, even the “low” quality satnav measurements and transmissions exhibit relatively clear traces. The techniques presented herein provide a novel framework
5 which may be able to produce a high-quality navigable map to handle noisy and sparse pedestrian geolocation transmissions. Such a navigable map could be utilised in any pedestrian journey to provide the user with reliable walking directions within the area. And while the techniques disclosed herein have particular application for the production of navigable pedestrian maps, they also have wider application in the
10 generation of navigable roadmaps produced from geolocation transmissions from, for example, in-vehicle satnav equipment.

Typical application scenarios include indoor navigation, such as in shopping malls, airports and the like, or partially indoor-outdoor journeys as are commonly required
15 at tourist attractions. The techniques are particularly suitable for single-level mapping, both indoor and outdoor. The example of Figure 2 is in an almost wholly outdoors context, at a garden attraction.

The techniques disclosed herein propose a framework in which three steps – each of
20 which may be provided individually – combine for the generation of navigable map data using geolocation transmissions from the communications device of users (these may be pedestrians undertaking walking journeys). The techniques are robust in view of the inherent low-quality in the transmitted geolocation measurements (“pings”) from the users’ mobile phones and with high inference accuracy. Amongst
25 others, the techniques may integrate the merits of kernel density estimation (KDE) and a trace merge algorithm. The techniques explore the information of the starting point and destination point of users’ trips to extract journey traces of high quality. The extra information facilitates the resolution of the issue of sparse data such that the clear journey trace data sets may be extracted even when only a handful of
30 geolocation measurements/transmissions are available.

- In the following discussion, Figures 2 – 6 should be viewed in conjunction with one another. Looking first at Figure 3a, this depicts a geographical area divided into a group 300 of geographical cells 302. In one implementation, the geographical cells 302 are defined according to geohash standards and may be, for example, defined in terms of precision level, for example at geohash 8 (defining an area of 38.2m x 19m) or geohash 9 (defining an area of 4.8m x 4.8m), or another precision level which may be desired.
- 10 These geographical cells 302 have precisely-defined (e.g. by latitude and longitude) location points within them, for example location 304 is defined as the centre point of one of the cells 302a and locations 306 are defined as non-centre points of another of the cells 302b.
- 15 A user/traveller 308 is shown about to commence a user journey depicted by the line 310 in Figure 3a from journey start point 312 to journey end point 314. In one example of such a journey, user 308 is at location 312 and, using a ride-hailing app resident on the user communications device (such as user communications device 104 or 106 from Figure 1) the user has arranged to be picked up by a car (not shown) at location 314. While traversing the route 310 by walking, the mobile communications device 104, 106 of user 308 transmits, to communications server apparatus 102, geolocation measurements as determined using satnav components 138 at locations 316a, 316b, 316... 316n. In the example given, the initial geolocation transmission location 316a coincides with journey start location 312 and geolocation transmission location 316n coincides with journey end location 314.
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- The geolocation transmissions 318 are shown schematically in Figure 3b. The boxes 318 represent data encoded in transmissions transmitted by the user communications device 104, 106 to the communications server apparatus 102.
- 30 Communications server apparatus 102 receives the geolocation transmissions 318,

storing them in database 126, or other storage. Communications server apparatus 102 forms an overall group 326 of all geolocation transmissions 318 from all user communication devices 104, 106 in the group 300 of geographical cells. Referring to Figure 3c, each geolocation transmission 318 comprises at least first data field 324

5 defining a value representing the latitude of the user communication device at the time the geolocation transmission was transmitted, second data field 322 defining a value representing the longitude of the user communication device at the time the geolocation transmission was transmitted and third data field 324 defining a value representing the precision of the geolocation measurement as derived by the user

10 communication device. In the situation where the GNSS system is the Global Positioning System (GPS), the geolocation transmissions are sometimes referred to as “GPS pings”, and the data field 324 of the GPS ping is a measurement of the GPS quality index, an indicator of the accuracy of the GPS measurement.

15 It will be appreciated that journey/journey trace 310 may be just one of multiple journeys that multiple users undertake in the group 300 of geographical cells, although these other journeys are omitted from Figure 3 for the sake of clarity. Further, at least some of these multiple journeys may end at the same journey end location 314, particularly if journey end location 314 is somewhere like a designated

20 pickup/drop off point at or near a public place, such as an entrance to a shopping mall, an office block, a tourist attraction and so on. And of course, some of these multiple journeys may also commence from the same starting location 312, or at least from the same cell 302 that starting location 312 is located within.

25 In the example of Figure 3, communications server apparatus 102 forms a first group 328 of geolocation transmissions 318 and, optionally (as described below), a second group 330. First group 328 defines geolocation transmissions 318 transmitted by a particular user, or at least is a grouping of geolocation transmissions estimated to have been transmitted by a particular user. This grouping can be done in a number

30 of ways, but in the example of Figure 3, communications server apparatus 102

identifies geolocation transmissions from journeys/journey traces which have a common starting location 312 and a common destination location 314, where these locations can be pinpointed as precise locations such as a centre location 304 of a cell or a non-centre location 306 or defined as wider geographical areas, such as one of the geographical cells 302, or a mixture of both. For instance, it may be that common starting location 312 is defined broadly as being any location within a particular cell 302 and the destination location 314 is a specific location point, defined by a latitude and a longitude. In this implementation, grouping by destination is a useful way of collecting data. In an alternative implementation, it is possible to do the initial grouping based on starting location.

It will be recalled from above that term such as “first” and “second” with respect to groups 328, 330 are not necessarily intended to indicate temporal or other prioritisation of the elements. The labelling of the groups thus is not to suggest that the first group is formed prior to the second group. Indeed, in the current example and as best viewed with reference to Figure 6 (illustrating the steps of a process which may be used in the generation of journey trace datasets), after the process starts at 602, communications server apparatus 102 forms, at step 604, second group 330 of geolocation transmissions 318 from journey traces having a common destination location 314. In a preferred arrangement, the common destination location is a precise location, defined by a latitude and a longitude. At step 606, communications server apparatus 102 forms first group 328 of geolocation transmissions 318 within second group 330, where the geolocation transmissions in the first group 320 also have a common starting location 312. In a preferred arrangement, the common starting location is a geographical cell 302, as can be defined using, for example, the geohash protocols/definitions. But it will also be appreciated that, in an alternative arrangement, communications server apparatus 102 forms first group 328 of geolocation transmissions 318 having a common starting location and the common destination location without a specific step of forming the second group 330.

Thus, in this example of Figures 3 – 6, first group 328 of geolocation transmissions 318 defines a subset of second group 330 of geolocation transmissions 318, and second group 330 forms a subset of overall group 326 of geolocation transmissions from all users (e.g. in the group 300 of geographical cells 302). Or, to put it another way, communications server apparatus 102 is configured for the first group 328 of geolocation transmissions 318 to be formed from a second group 330 of geolocation transmissions 318 from journey traces 310 having the common destination location 314, but different starting locations 312. As noted above, for the communications server apparatus 102 to group the geolocation transmissions 318 in this way, this can be considered a good approximation of capturing geolocation transmissions from the same user. Other techniques can also be used either separately or in conjunction with this grouping, for example detecting a unique identifier (not shown) transmitted in or with the geolocation transmission 318 is a useful technique. Typical unique identifiers include something identifying the user of the (for example) ride-hailing app resident on the user's communication device, such as a login username for the app, or other such means, like the international mobile equipment identity (IMEI) of the user's communication device. It may not be necessary actually to identify the user or the user's communications device 104, 106; it may be sufficient to determine or estimate/approximate which of the geolocation transmissions 318 are transmitted by a particular device, without specifically having to identify the device itself or the device user.

It will therefore be appreciated that communications server apparatus 102 generates a journey trace data set 338 by: forming a first group 328 of geolocation transmissions 318 from journey traces 310 having a common starting location 312 and a common destination location 314; depending on accuracy values 324 for geolocation transmissions 318 within the first group 328, determining the weighted shortest path from the common starting location 312 to the common destination location 314 or generating a density-based extracted trace from the common

starting location to the common destination location; and defining the journey trace data set 338 using either the weighted shortest path or the density-based extracted trace

- 5 Referring again to Figure 6, at step 608, communications server apparatus 102 reads the accuracy values 324 from the geolocation transmissions 318 in first group 328. Depending on the quality of the accuracy values, datasets defining the journey traces 310 may be generated in one of two ways. Thus, at step 610, communications server apparatus 102 applies a thresholding step to determine whether the accuracy values
- 10 of the geolocation transmissions 318 are of a high quality or of a low quality. For instance, if the accuracy values are equal to or above, say, a median value, or a 75-quantile value, or a value on a pre-defined scale for measuring the accuracy value (e.g. 50, on a scale of 1 to 100), then the accuracy values are deemed to be of high-quality. Conversely, if the accuracy values are below the designated threshold value,
- 15 then they are deemed to be of low-quality and passed for processing in the second branch of the algorithm as illustrated on the right-hand side of Figure 6, and as will be described below.

- For geolocation transmissions 318 with sufficiently high accuracy values 324 – i.e.,
- 20 above the thresholding value which is determined and applied at step 610 – communications server apparatus 102 determines, at step 612 of Figure 6, weighting values 332 for the geolocation transmissions 318, as depicted at Figure 3d, with those geolocation transmissions having higher accuracy values 324, being accorded higher weighting values 332. In one implementation, communications server
- 25 apparatus 102 calculates weighting values at step 612 for geolocation transmissions from the same user journey 310.

Optionally, communications server apparatus 102 normalises the weighting values 332 to facilitate easy processing of the weighting values 332, at optional step 614 of

Figure 6. A dataset 334 of weighting values 332 is created by communications server apparatus 102, as depicted in Figure 3e.

These may be normalised weighting values, if normalisation is conducted at step
5 614.

It will be appreciated that the checking of the accuracy values of the geolocation transmissions, and filtering of them into high- and low-quality geolocation transmissions, and the subsequent weighting calculations are an optional series of
10 steps. That is, communications server apparatus may proceed directly to step 615, now described, after execution of step 606 as described above.

At step 615, sorting of the geolocation transmissions 318 is conducted by communications server apparatus 102 basically to determine whether geolocation
15 transmissions 318 (or parameters relating thereto) satisfy one or more thresholding criteria this will constitute further sort of geolocation transmissions, if the optional steps of checking and weighting of the accuracy values is undertaken, as described above. Two examples of such filtering now follow:

20 In a first technique, communications server apparatus 102 processes, at step 615, the geolocation transmissions 318 in the first group 328 to determine whether there are a minimum number of geolocation transmissions in a set, such as first group 328, for example when the first group 328 defines a set of geolocation transmissions from a user in a single journey, as described above. Thresholding is then applied and, in
25 one example of this thresholding, the minimum number of geolocation transmissions 318 which are required is 10, but the value may depend on factors such as the overall sampling frequency and the application area size. A preferred range of numbers of geolocation transmissions to satisfy the threshold criterion is between 10 and 30.

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That is, communications server apparatus 102 is configured to filter geolocation transmissions 318 if a number of geolocation transmissions in the first group 328 is less than a predefined minimum number.

- 5 In a second technique, which may be provided separately or in combination with the first technique, communications server apparatus 102 processes, at step 615, the geolocation transmissions 318 in the first group 328 to determine whether the geolocation transmissions 318 are sufficiently evenly distributed, meaning that the distances between two neighbouring transmissions 318 are similar across a whole
10 trip. Thus, the spacing between neighbouring transmissions 318 is determined and thresholding is applied by communications server apparatus 102 to determine whether the spacing between the geolocation transmissions 308 is sufficiently uniform by using a function whereby, for a trip with an overall straight-line distance between the start location and the destination location, each pair of neighbouring
15 geolocation transmissions should be spaced apart by no more than half of the overall straight-line distance.

- That is, communications server apparatus 102 is configured to filter geolocation transmissions 318 special distribution of geolocation transmissions in the first group
20 of geolocation transmissions satisfies a threshold criterion.

- Any geolocation transmissions 318 found not to satisfy the threshold criterion/criteria are considered to be “low-quality” and then passed for processing in the second branch of the algorithm as illustrated on the right-hand side of Figure
25 6, and as will be described below.

- At step 616, communications server apparatus 102 denotes the starting point of the journey trace as being the centre point of the cell 302 from which the user journey commenced, and this may be regardless of which specific point in that geographical
30 cell 302 the journey from which the geolocation transmissions 318 have been taken.

At step 618, communications server apparatus 102 denotes the journey endpoint as being the specific destination location which, if it is recalled, is the pickup/rendezvous point with the driver in this example.

5 At step 620, communications server apparatus 102 applies a weighted shortest path technique, as is known, in order to define the journey trace based on the locations 316 from which the geolocation transmissions 318 have been transmitted. At step 622, communications server apparatus 102 uses this weighted shortest path to define nodes 336 and connections 337 (illustrated in Figure 5) therebetween and to
10 output the journey trace dataset 338a, depicted in Figure 3f the corresponding data values for the nodes and connections for the user journey 310 of Figure 3a. The process for generating journey trace data sets ends at step 623. In one implementation, the nodes 336 are defined as location data using, say, latitude and longitude values, converted from the image data, with the connections 337 being
15 defined on the basis of connecting two nodes.

Therefore, communications server apparatus 102 is configured to determine the weighted shortest path by deriving weightings 332 for geolocation transmissions 318 in the first group 328 using the accuracy values 324; defining the common starting
20 location 312 as a geographical cell 302; and forming an overall group 334 of weighted geolocation transmissions from plural user journeys starting in the geographical cell. Further, communications server apparatus 102 may be configured to determine the weighted shortest path by: identifying a centre of the geographical cell 302; and defining the weighted shortest path between the centre of the
25 geographical cell and the common destination location 314 using the overall group 326 of weighted geolocation transmissions.

As noted above, multiple user journeys may have been undertaken in the area 300 and communications server apparatus 102 is configured to generate plural journey

trace datasets 338a, 338b, 338c... 338m, as shown in Figure 3f, thereby to generate a series 340 of journey trace datasets 338.

Coming back to step 610, if communications server apparatus 102 determines that
5 the accuracy values 324 for the geolocation transmissions 318 are not above the threshold value, an alternative set of steps (a separate algorithm branch) is taken in order to generate the journey trace dataset. At step 624, communications server apparatus 102 groups all of the lower-accuracy geolocation transmissions 318. At step 626, communications server apparatus 102 determines the geographical cells
10 302 which cover the area from which the geolocation transmissions 318 were transmitted. For instance, this determination may be that the entire set 300 of geographical cells from Figure 3a is the set of geographical cells, or it may be a subset of this group of geographical cells from which all the geolocation transmissions 318 were transmitted. At step 628, communications server apparatus
15 102 divides geographical cells 302 into area portions 400, as illustrated in Figure 4a. In one exemplary implementation, the size of the area portions 400 is 2 m x 2 m, a typical pathway width at, say, outdoor attractions.

At step 630, communications server apparatus 102 applies weighting values for each
20 of the geolocation transmissions 318, in a similar fashion to step 612 as described above, based on the accuracy values 324 of the geolocation transmissions 318. At step 632, communications server apparatus 102 determines the number of geolocation transmissions 318 that have been transmitted from each of the area portions 400, based on the latitude and longitude values 320, 322 from the geolocation
25 transmissions 318. This is depicted in Figure 4a, from the digit counts shown in each of the area portions 400. At step 632, communications server apparatus 102 derives an overall weighting value for the area portions 400, and arranges these into a dataset 402 of overall weighting values for the area portions, as depicted in Figure 4b. In one exemplary implementation, the overall weighting values 402 are derived
30 by summing the individual weighting values derived at step 632, as described above.

The overall weighting values 404 are depicted conceptually in Figure 4c as the dots within each of the area portions 400, with the value of the weightings illustrated conceptually according to the sizing of the dots; that is, larger-sized dots represent higher weighting values than smaller-sized dots.

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At step 634, communications server apparatus 102 derives a density value 406 for each area portion 400, with the set 408 of density values 406 being for each area portion within each cell 302 of the group of geographical cells 300, depicted in Figure 4d. The density dataset may, for example, define an image dataset; that is, the density values are generated in a format which makes the data suitable for rendering as an image. Thus, in such a situation, the density value may correspond to a pixel value, for a pixel in the image to be rendered, with the density value defining, for example, a brightness of the pixel. At step 636, communications server apparatus 102 applies a skeleton extraction technique from the density dataset 408, thereby to derive skeleton dataset 410, as depicted in Figure 4e. The values in the skeleton dataset 410 may define, for example, the nodes 336 from Figure 5. In effect, the nodes 336 correspond to “merged” geolocation transmission points, since these are derived using the data from multiple geolocation transmissions 318 at points 316 as described above. Then, at step 638, communications server apparatus 102 generates connections 337 between the nodes 336, generating data in the dataset defining the connections. with the result being the shortest path definition at step 640 from the starting location 312 to the destination location 314, defining the journey trace datasets 338, from Figure 3f. The journey trace dataset generated at step 622 may be generated only for the high-accuracy geolocation transmissions 318 using the algorithm implemented by steps 612 – 620 as described above, only for the low-accuracy geolocation transmissions 318 using the algorithm branch implemented by steps 624 – 638, or when communications server apparatus 102 is processing a mixture of high-accuracy and low-accuracy geolocation transmissions 318, the journey trace dataset output at step 622 may be a combination of the shortest paths determined at steps 620 and 640 respectively.

With the second algorithm branch (starting at step 624) this, in effect, collects geolocation transmissions from multiple trips together, generating a kernel density function over the underlying area and extract trace data from the density image dataset using weighted shortest path.

Thus it will be appreciated that communications server apparatus 102 is configured to determine the density-based extracted trace by determining a group 300 of geographical cells 302 within which the geolocation transmissions 318 of an overall group 326 of geolocation transmissions 318 were transmitted from; generating a density image data set 408 for the overall group 326 of geolocation transmissions 318; deriving a skeleton data set 410 of merged geolocation transmission points from the density image data set 408; generating connections between merged geolocation transmission points 336 in the skeleton data set; defining a centre of a geographical cell as a starting location 312; and determining a shortest path of geolocation transmission points between the starting location 312 and the common destination location 314, the shortest path defining the density-based extracted trace. Communications server apparatus 104 may generate the density image dataset 408 by dividing the group 300 of geographical cells 302 into area portions 400; deriving weightings for geolocation transmissions 318 in the overall group 326 using accuracy values 324 of the geolocation transmissions 318 in the overall group 326; determining an overall weighting value 402 for geolocation transmissions 318 generated from within an area portion 400; and determining a corresponding density value 406 for the area portion 400 using the overall weighting value 402.

Thus, it will also be appreciated that – using either algorithm branch after step 610 of Figure 6 – communications server apparatus 102 is configured to generate a series 340 of journey trace datasets 338, each journey trace dataset 338 comprising data representing a user journey 310, each journey trace dataset 338 being derived using

geolocation transmissions 318 from a communications device 104, 106 of a user 308 undertaking the user journey 310.

In the next step, with the series 340 of journey trace datasets 338, communications
5 server apparatus 102 generates route image data comprising data representing a
network of navigable routes. The journey trace datasets are derived from
geolocation transmissions based on different user trajectories, even from the same
starting and destination locations; journey traces between the same locations may
overlap partially or fully with one another. They may deviate from one another, even
10 slightly, due to differences in geolocation measurements/transmissions or by slight
deviations in the actual routes traversed by the different users, or even from the
same user undertaking the same journey more than once, but with slight variations.
Thus, in the next step, the journey trace datasets are aggregated/merged so that
redundant routes are minimised, deriving information relating to more commonly-
15 used routes as well.

Figures 7 and 8 may be viewed in conjunction with one another. In Figure 7, user
journey 310 as illustrated in Figure 3a is here again represented, this time being a
representation of the journey trace dataset 338 which defines the journey 310, with
20 Figure 7 representing a rendering in image form of journey trace data.

Communications server apparatus 102 superimposes the series 340 of journey trace
datasets 338, effectively merging the different user journeys into a single dataset, or
at least datasets for individual user journey traces which can be correlated with one
another. One way of doing this is for communications server apparatus 102 to
25 render all journey trace datasets as image data, data either rendered as an image or
capable of being so rendered.

In Figure 7, a second user journey is represented by dashed line 700. User journey
700 is near identical to user journey 310, but subject to some deviation attributable
30 either to errors in the geolocation measurements and/or slight deviations in the

precise path traversed by the user undertaking journey 700. Sections 702 of the user journey traces illustrate where these traces overlap with one another or are sufficiently close to one another so that the journey traces in the sections are effectively identical. This is indicated by the heavier weight of the lines in these sections. Thus, the aggregation/merging of the journey trace datasets allows representation of journey trace density, with lines of heavier density indicating more frequently travelled routes. The example of Figure 7 illustrates the principle using only two user journeys 310, 700 starting from or near the same starting location 312 and finishing at or near the same destination location 314. It will be appreciated that there may be other user journeys between the same starting and destination locations 312, 314 which follow a similar route between these locations but that other routes may also be followed between these starting and destination locations. It will also be appreciated that there will be other user journeys between different starting and destination locations, other user journeys starting from or near the same starting location 312 but finishing at a different destination location, and other user journeys starting from a different starting location, but finishing at or near the destination location 314. These, however, are omitted from Figure 7 for the sake of clarity. However, if any of the sections of these additional journey traces overlap with sections of user journeys 310, 700, these overlap sections may be represented in a similar fashion by increasing the weights of the lines in the overlapping sections.

The route image data 704 thus generated is depicted schematically in Figure 7b. So, communications server apparatus 102 is configured to aggregate the series 340 of journey trace datasets 338 by generating aggregated journey trace image data using journey trace data 338 for multiple journey traces 310, 700, the journey trace image data being representative of journey trace density. Further, the multiple journey trace datasets 338 may comprise data representative of user journeys from multiple geographical cells to a common destination location.

Of course, the journey trace density may be represented in other ways instead of according to the weights of the lines 310, 700 and/or the common sections 702; for instance, this could be done using different colours or in another suitable fashion in order to represent variations in journey trace density (i.e. the more frequently
5 travelled routes or route sections).

Thus, the process 800, after starting at 802, collates all journey trace datasets, at step 804, effectively aggregating the series of journey trace datasets. The aggregated journey trace datasets are used to generate aggregated journey trace image data at
10 step 806, by aggregating the individual journey trace datasets 338 as described above. These individual journey trace datasets may define traces which overlap partially or fully between common destination and starting locations, with or without the deviations mentioned above. Communications server apparatus 102 generates the aggregated journey trace datasets as image data – i.e., data suitable
15 for rendering as an image – such as a greyscale image with pixel brightness values corresponding to trace density. That is, the more frequently-travelled routes are represented in thicker and/or darker lines (or at least the image data is capable of being rendered thus). At step 808, communications server apparatus 102 applies one or more (known) skeleton extraction techniques with, optionally, further image
20 processing techniques such as blurring and grey-closing. At step 810, communications server apparatus 102 generates the resulting skeleton illustrated in Figure 9 which provides a clean representation of the navigable routes from each of the geographical cells 302 to one or more destination locations.

25 As noted above, the navigable route data from Figure 9 is image data and is thus incapable of being used directly in navigation. Therefore, communications server apparatus 102 converts the route image data into navigable map data with proper road and node representation. Thus, communications server apparatus 102 generates a navigable map data by correlating the data representing sections of

routes in the network of navigable routes with geolocations and/or with known thoroughfares.

Referring to Figure 10, a process 1000 for generating navigable map data is illustrated. Process 1000 starts at 1002 and that 1004, communications server apparatus 102 correlates the aggregated journey trace image data – for example as rendered in Figure 9 – with known geolocation data. This may be done by, for example, superimposing or otherwise correlating points in the route skeleton image data of Figure 9 with the geolocations this represents. That is, for example, it is known from the pixel data for pixel 902 in Figure 9 that this is part of the route image data representing part of the network of navigable routes and that the network of navigable routes is superimposed over map data, each map data point defining a geolocation by, for example, latitude and longitude values. As such, communications server apparatus 102 associates/correlates that pixel 902 with the underlying geolocation. Likewise, since communications server apparatus 102 has access to this map data, it is able to associate the route geolocation data with known nodes, known landmarks in the geographical area, with this step being completed at 1006.

Communications server apparatus 102 repeats this process for each pixel in the route image data, and associates geolocations corresponding to pixels which are adjacent to one another in the image data at step 1008. As such, the geolocations associated with/underlying the pixel points are associated with one another as being part of the navigable route, that is possible to travel from one geolocation to another, with those geolocations being represented by pixel points in the route image data.

At step 1010, communications server apparatus 102 simplifies each route or segment thereof such that a straight line in the connected geolocation data can be represented efficiently by only two end nodes, the nodes representing the end

locations in a segment of the navigable route. One suitable technique for this step is to implement Ramer–Douglas–Peucker algorithm processing. Finally, at step 1012, communications server apparatus 102 identifies any intersections in the navigable map data denoting these as intersection nodes.

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The process ends at 1014, after which communications server apparatus 102 has generated, from the route image data (from step 810) the navigable map data, the navigable map data comprising data representing a series of geolocations corresponding to the network of navigable routes, as depicted in Figure 11.

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Figure 12 presents an overview of the techniques described above, in the context of the navigable map data being for use by pedestrians as walkable maps.

Thus, the techniques presented above are particularly useful, especially in the generation of navigable walking maps for pedestrian use. Pedestrian travellers tend to cover short distances by walking, and the traces representing their journeys cover a smaller area compared to those of vehicles. In order to infer a pedestrian walkable map for a given area, geolocation transmissions from all user journeys available in whole area are grouped by their respective destination. The application scenarios are widely found in ride-hailing and navigation where users have their destination points specified in advance. Each group of geolocation transmissions can be processed following the three-step framework described below, thereby to generate a walkable map specific to area surrounding the users' journeys. The complete walkable map of the area can be obtained by merging separate walkable maps.

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It will be appreciated that the invention has been described by way of example only. Various modifications may be made to the techniques described herein without departing from the spirit and scope of the appended claims. The disclosed techniques comprise techniques which may be provided in a stand-alone manner, or

in combination with one another. Therefore, features described with respect to one technique may also be presented in combination with another technique.

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Claims

1. Communications server apparatus for generating navigable map data, the communications server apparatus comprising a processor and a memory, and being
5 configured, under control of the processor, to execute instructions stored in the memory:
to generate a series of journey trace data sets, each journey trace data set comprising data representing a user journey, each journey trace data set being derived using geolocation transmissions from a communications device of a user
10 undertaking the user journey;
to aggregate the series of journey trace data sets to generate route image data comprising data representing a network of navigable routes; and
to generate, from the route image data, the navigable map data, the navigable map data comprising data representing a series of geolocations
15 corresponding to the network of navigable routes.
2. Communications server apparatus according to claim 1, configured to generate a journey trace data set by:
forming a first group of geolocation transmissions from journey traces having
20 a common starting location and a common destination location;
depending on accuracy values for geolocation transmissions within the first group, determining a weighted shortest path from the common starting location to the common destination location or generating a density-based extracted trace from the common starting location to the common destination location; and
25 defining the journey trace data set using either the weighted shortest path or the density-based extracted trace.
3. Communications server apparatus according to claim 2, configured for the first group of geolocation transmissions to be formed from a second group of

geolocation transmissions from journey traces having the common destination location but different starting locations.

4. Communications server apparatus according to any preceding claim,
5 configured to filter geolocation transmissions if a number of geolocation transmissions in the first group of geolocation transmissions is less than a predefined minimum number.
5. Communications server apparatus according to any preceding claim,
10 configured to filter geolocation transmissions if spatial distribution of geolocation transmissions in the first group of geolocation transmissions satisfies a threshold criterion.
6. Communications server apparatus according to any one of claims 2 to 5,
15 configured to determine the weighted shortest path by:
 - deriving weightings for geolocation transmissions in the first group using the accuracy values;
 - defining the common starting location as a geographical cell; and
 - forming an overall group of weighted geolocation transmissions from plural
20 user journeys starting in the geographical cell.
7. Communications server apparatus according to claim 6, configured to determine the weighted shortest path by:
 - identifying a centre of the geographical cell; and
 - 25 defining the weighted shortest path between the centre of the geographical cell and the common destination location using the overall group of weighted geolocation transmissions.
8. Communications server apparatus according to claim 2, configured to
30 determine the density-based extracted trace by:

- determining a group of geographical cells within which the geolocation transmissions of an overall group of geolocation transmissions were transmitted from;
- generating a density image data set for the overall group of geolocation transmissions;
- 5 deriving a skeleton data set of merged geolocation transmission points from the density image data set;
- generating connections between merged geolocation transmission points in the skeleton data set;
- 10 defining a centre of a geographical cell as a starting location; and
- determining a shortest path of geolocation transmission points between the starting location and the common destination location, the shortest path defining the density-based extracted trace.
- 15 9. Communications server apparatus according to claim 8, configured to generate the density image data set by:
- dividing the group of geographical cells into area portions;
- deriving weightings for geolocation transmissions in the overall group using accuracy values of the geolocation transmissions in the overall group;
- 20 determining an overall weighting value for geolocation transmissions generated from within an area portion; and
- determining a corresponding density value for the area portion using the overall weighting value.
- 25 10. Communications server apparatus according to claim 1, configured to aggregate the series of journey trace data sets by generating aggregated journey trace image data using journey trace data for multiple journey traces, the journey trace image data being representative of journey trace density.

11. Communications server apparatus according to claim 10, wherein the multiple journey trace data sets comprise data representative of user journeys from multiple geographical cells to a common destination location.
- 5 12. Communications server apparatus according to claim 10 or claim 11, configured to perform skeleton extraction processing on the journey trace image data, thereby to derive the data representing the network of navigable routes.
- 10 13. Communications server apparatus according to claim 1, configured to generate the navigable map data by correlating the data representing sections of routes in the network of navigable routes with geolocations and/or with known thoroughfares.
- 15 14. Communications server apparatus according to claim 13, configured to associate geolocations with one another thereby to generate the navigable map data.
- 20 15. A method, performed in a communications server apparatus for generating navigable map data, the method comprising, under control of a processor of the server apparatus:
- generating a series of journey trace data sets, each journey trace data set comprising data representing a user journey, each journey trace data set being derived using geolocation transmissions from a communications device of a user undertaking the user journey;
- 25 aggregating the series of journey trace data sets to generate route image data comprising data representing a network of navigable routes; and
- generating, from the route image data, the navigable map data, the navigable map data comprising data representing a series of geolocations corresponding to the network of navigable routes.
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16. A computer program product comprising instructions for implementing the method of claim 15.
17. A computer program comprising instructions for implementing the method of
5 claim 15.
18. A non-transitory storage medium storing instructions, which when executed by a processor, cause the processor to perform the method of claim 15.