Google Testing Augmented Reality Navigation in Maps

Google forever changed the way we got around when it launched turn-by-turn navigation in Android 2.0 Eclair. That feature was in “beta” for years despite being available on almost every smartphone on the planet. Google’s latest beta navigation feature is starting out with a much smaller group of testers. Google Maps augmented reality navigation is live for some users, the *Wall Street Journal* reports, and you may have it before you know it.

GPS is a fundamentally amazing technology — satellites thousands of miles above our heads are beaming location coordinates to our phones. GPS locations can still be off by a few meters, but that doesn’t matter much for a car that you are driving. After all, you’re *probably* driving it on the road, so your phone can fuzz the exact location a bit to keep track of your location. When you’re walking, GPS location is a bit less useful. That’s also the case with the future of self-driving cars, which will need very precise location data.

Google Maps AR navigation uses GPS for approximate location data, but it adds computer vision and machine learning to nail down exactly where you are. In AR mode, you’ll point your phone at the world around you so it can scan your surroundings. Google has years of Street View images, which it can use to orient the system. Thus, in walking navigation mode, you can pan around to see your path overlaid on the real world. When there’s a turn coming up, you’ll see a giant floating arrow pointing the way.

Google first demoed AR navigation at I/O last year, but it’s not available fully yet. So far, only select “local guides” who have contributed extensively to Maps have been granted access.

There will still be some caveats when it rolls out, though. AR navigation is not for driving, obviously, because you aren’t supposed to stare at the screen in search of floating arrows while behind the wheel. Even when walking, Maps doesn’t want you to use AR continuously. Google apparently found that people will remain glued to the screen and ignore their surroundings. So, it acts as a way to help you get your bearings before putting the phone in your pocket.

The current interface is still non-final, so the feature could look different when it comes to your phone. Google says it will roll the feature out more widely when it’s confident the experience is solid.