

Hall of Fame.



**HAD THE
GUTS,
GOT THE
GLORY**

HE ROCKED THE MAPPING WORLD

THE HARDER THE STRUGGLE, THE more glorious the triumph. But not many people have the courage to persevere in the face of failures. Nor do they have the fortitude to not give up on their dreams despite setbacks. And there would only be a handful who have the wits to make their business sustain for 20 long years in startup-like conditions. A handful, like Belgium-born Alain De Taeye — the co-founder of Tele Atlas, the digital mapping company which was acquired by TomTom in 2008.

People take digital maps for granted now. They were not there to witness the time when map-making was considered an art, and map-reading needed skills. For long in history, many from Ptolemy to Piri Reis and Jodocus Hondius mapped the known world. De Taeye was one of the first to carry that tradition forward in the cyber world.



Alain De Taeye's vision towards creating and nurturing commercial geospatial content has empowered commoditization and consumerization of mapping capabilities

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*In an interview
Alain De Taeye and
his son Niek De Taeye
share their views on
the future of start-ups,
June, 2016*

Courtesy: WebTomorrow

I was absolutely convinced that people all over the world will use digital maps. I had no doubts

"For me, it was logical that maps would also become digital and the reason for that is that actually routing the algorithm already existed since the '60s. We had the tools to calculate all kinds of things, but we did not have the digital maps. So, it was a kind of logical thing to do to fill in the gap," De Taeye recalls.

After graduating as an engineer-architect from the University of Ghent in Belgium, De Taeye launched Informatics & Management Consultants as an IT consultancy firm in the late 1980s. But, he continued work on digital map databases and routing fundamentals to today's satellite-based navigation devices.

Remembering those days brings a smile on De Taeye's lips. "It sounded like a bit of science fiction in those days. Remember, I was in the '80s and we talked about the cars that will actually

tell you to drive from point A to B and then people compared me once to the knight rider."

In 1989, I&M merged with the Dutch Tele Atlas group, and a year later, De Taeye became its head. Here his vision toward creating and nurturing Tele Atlas focused on commercial geospatial content, which added immense value by empowering commoditization and consumerization of geospatial capabilities. "I never gave up on the idea that navigation will be used by everyone today and I am very happy to say that's the case," De Taeye quips.

**DID YOU
KNOW?**
ALAIN DE
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ENTREPRENEURIAL
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IT CONSULTANCY FIRM
CALLED INFORMATICS
& MANAGEMENT
CONSULTANTS



“The Holy Grail of mapping is to build a real-time map. A real-time map means any change in reality finds its way immediately

In the early days, there were immense challenges to overcome. “The traditional map-making companies were oriented toward creating paper maps. And the people who were trying to digitize these maps had difficulties in managing the transfer from their original paper map production processes to digital maps. A new company that can start from scratch was the need of the hour, and that made it easier for us to take that step,” he recalls.

The good thing about doing something new is that it's new. But, the bad thing is that you always end up encountering things you were not expecting. De Taeve was determined to go on when the lesser mortals would give up.

DID YOU KNOW?

IN 1993, ALAIN DE TAEVE CREATED THE EUROPEAN DIGITAL ROADMAP ASSOCIATION, CONSISTING OF ETAK, TELE ATLAS AND ROBERT BOSCH (AMONG OTHERS)



As the world's largest digital map maker, it was only natural that Tele Atlas and TomTom would eventually come together

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"Of course you are disappointed when you have your first failure, when you are not that lucky and things postpone. But, that's when you stubbornly go on and never give up," he insists.

In the early '90s, success started to show with some top carmakers, like Mercedes and BMW, becoming early adopters. And even though they introduced digital maps in a very small volume of cars, it was a clear proof that what De Taeye was trying to do made sense.

In 1993, De Taeye helped create the European Digital Roadmap Association

with Robert Bosch. Meanwhile, Dutch firm TomTom had in parallel begun a revolutionary transition from PDAs to navigation applications, such as, EnRoute. De Taeye found out that it shared the same vision as him. "I was absolutely convinced that people all over the world will use digital maps. I had no doubts. I had doubts about when and how fast it would go and how much money it would cost, whether I could afford it and so on."

As the world's largest digital map maker, it was only natural that Tele Atlas

DID YOU KNOW?

TELE ATLAS, WHICH WAS CO-FOUNDED BY ALAIN DE TAEYE, WAS ACQUIRED BY TOMTOM IN 2008



De Taeye continues to inspire the younger generation. Speaking at the TEDx Brussels conference, 2011



and TomTom would eventually come together. This happened in 2008 — four years after TomTom had launched its first affordable portable navigation device, TomTom Go. De Taeye calls the move as democratization of the navigation industry. "They took an existing technology that was available to only few people, and they made a fantastic product out of."

The merger of TomTom and Tele Atlas saw De Taeye don a new hat, on the executive management board of TomTom. His continued leadership brought consistency in overall evolution of geospatial content strategy offering newer dimensions and utilities across different disciplines driving future course of business direction, including e-commerce, autonomous vehicles, indoor mapping, etc.

But De Taeye is convinced that digital maps still have a long way to go, even as we talk about 3D maps, fleet management or autonomous vehicles that need highly-accurate maps to navigate. "The Holy Grail of mapping is to build a real-time map. A real-time map means any change in reality finds its way immediately through the whole production process of the map back to the user, the moment there is a change," he explains.

Over the years, De Taeye has drawn inspiration and strength from his family and friends. It may seem normal now, but in those days, creating digital maps for future navigation system was kind of a crazy idea. "I am very happy that my family supported that idea. My dad inspired me. He worked very hard. And at the end of the day, he was very good with people. He taught me how to work with people. You can say he was my role model. One of my teachers at the university — Professor Miller — also conditioned my mind to develop problem-solving skills."

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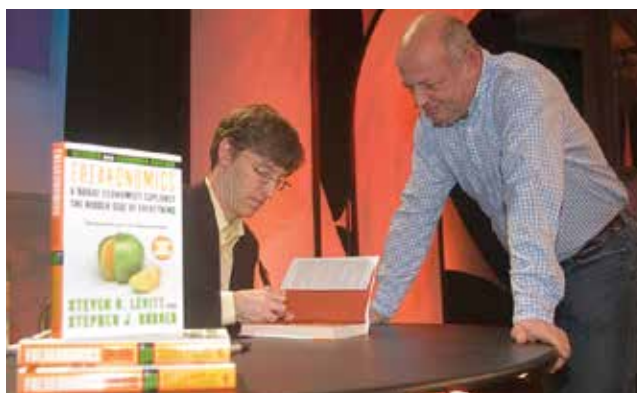
De Taeye (second from right) with (left to right) Harold Goddijn, CEO of TomTom; President Zdanowska, Mayor of Łódź; Management Board Member of TomTom; Krzysztof Miksa, TomTom and Engineering Director in Łódź cut the ribbon to open TomTom's new office in Łódź, Poland



The Tele Atlas mapper van had cameras on the top and the hard drives cabinet in the customized rear seat. Since July 30, 2008, the company has been a wholly owned subsidiary of automotive navigation system manufacturer TomTom



*De Taeye with Steven Levitt, the bestselling author of *Freakonomics* (2005)*



Just like his role models, De Taeye continues to inspire the younger generation. He often lectures at the Antwerp Business School, and has been featured on platforms like TED. "My advice to the young people is that don't make the mistake of building something on technology where you don't know where it will end up. You don't know what problem it would solve. Start the other way around. Look around. There are tons of problems, big problems, that still need to be solved, that aren't solved yet."

For De Taeye, the best thing about maps is that they are a never-ending story. "Maps have existed for thousands of years. And they will exist for a thousand more years. What will change is that they will get more accurate, they will get more up-to-date." And we suspect De Taeye will play a major part in that! 🌐