

Maps on the Web: Evolution or Revolution?

AGI Scotland Annual Event - 15 November 2006

Hugh Barron and Mike Bell

The sell-out 2006 AGI Scotland 8th Annual Event concentrated on the increasingly pervasive and ubiquitous world of web-mapping recently brought into widespread focus by Google Maps, Google Earth and latterly by Microsoft Live Local and Virtual Earth. Entitled '*Evolution or Revolution?*' the capacity crowd were treated to a string of presentations from the public, private and academic sectors before the floor was opened to the debate of web-mapping as a paradigm shift *versus* continuous progression.

Following a brief presentation by **Angela Baker** on the AGI/RGS-IBG Professional Development and Chartered Geographer Scheme, **Bruce Gittings** of the University of Edinburgh and **John Maslen** of Geowise provided a humorous but insightful overview entitled '*Mapping with Google: A lot of fuss over nothing?*'. Assuming the guise of a latter day Derek and Clive they highlighted the huge take-up of Google Maps and spin-off mash-ups, stepped through the history of web-based mapping systems from early efforts in the mid-nineties and ended on an exploration and comparison of the currently available offerings.

After providing a background to the Scottish Assessors' Portal GIS consultants **Gavin Keith** and **Andrew Harrison** detailed the objectives and results of a Google-based web-mapping pilot. Undertaken as a potential Internet-based mapping solution the results clearly presented the Google Maps application as being low cost with rapid development, though the issues of data quality and limited functionality were significant.

There followed three presentations based around experience in Scottish Local Authorities kicking off with **Hamish Thompson** of Angus Council and their implementation of the University of Minnesota's open source MapServer. Selected based on a number of variables, with cost being the greatest consideration, the demonstration emphasised that the product provides Angus Council with the integration, performance and value required.

With a number of years of experience in web mapping **Stewart McCall** of South Ayrshire took a more technical slant in reviewing the web-based mapping technologies currently available to developers. The benefits and shortcomings of standard web-based applications vis-à-vis the higher performance and improved functionality of rich internet applications (RIAs) were presented before Stewart went on to give an impressive live demonstration of the Flash based applications currently available to citizens through the South Ayrshire website.

After detailing the technical infrastructure of his well-respected organisation **Gary Semple** of Forth Valley GIS closed the mornings proceedings by demonstrating the '*mishmash*' of products employed in different ways for differing client needs. The mix included Flash, SVG, Google, javascript, and web services and components; thereby underlining the breadth and depth of choice highlighted in the morning's proceedings.

Alan Moore of Forth Valley GIS gave the first of the three afternoon plenary sessions. His wide-ranging overview of how the web, SOA, the evolution of SDIs and other developments are transforming GI from niche to mainstream. Increasingly, GI professionals are moving from spatial specialists to key integrators providing real business benefits. However, limited



recognition of GI in interoperability frameworks such as OSIAF and e-GIF and lack of co-ordination from central government are holding back further progress. In referring to the “Google” effect, Alan gave us a memorable culinary metaphor – “ready meal v gourmet data”.

This was followed by a plea from **David Forrest** of Glasgow University for better cartographic standards in web mapping applications. David showed some particularly good examples of poor cartography from travel industry websites, highlighting the limitations of “free” maps. He encouraged GI professionals and cartographers to point out these problems to service providers and suggest improvements.

Taking the analogy of a countryside walk his home, **Graham Vowles**, Co-chair of the OGC GeoDRM Working Group, ably demonstrated the concept of Geo Digital Rights Management in an environment of differing business models. The vision of GeoDRM was Automated Rights Management, built around an Interoperable Rights Management Framework.

Robin McLaren of the Know Edge Consortium gave a presentation on the work his consultancy team have been doing for the Geographic Information Panel to prepare a UK GI Strategy. That work has included significant engagement with industry through stakeholder workshops, email contributions and targeted interviews. The consultants will present their report to the GI Panel in December, and the GI Panel will then decide how to take this forward with Ministers.

Next was a review of the Scottish GI strategy ‘One Scotland – One Geography.’ **Duncan Macniven**, Chair of the Scottish Executive’s Geography Steering Group, charted its progress from birth within AGI Scotland to the beginnings of an SDI for Scotland. He cited examples from the ERAD GIS project and Land Management Contracts and pointed to the Transforming Public Services as the new driver for change.

The afternoon finished with the afternoon speakers panel session. Thanks again to the professional support of the AGI HQ team and the efforts of the AGI Scotland committee, particularly Angus McDonald, to all the event exhibitors, the Ordnance Survey for sponsoring the lunch and Tadpole Technology for sponsoring the post-event drinks.