"Get Caught Mapping" Interview

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You can read it online, here:
http://www.appliedthinking.org/articles/get_caught_mapping/

Abstract:

Jim McClellan interviewed me for an article entitled "Get caught mapping" which ran in the Guardian on 27th March 2003. This is the full interview. And yes, I really did say "paradigm shift" without laughing.

1. When did you start working on the London bloggers tube map? What gave you the idea? How's it been received so far?

I started the London Bloggers Tube Map project in June 2002. The idea came from a discussion I had with another blogger (Tom Coates, plasticbag.org) about mapping virtual spaces onto physical ones. It had been done before in different ways, with world maps of webloggers, but the tube seemed a concept that would much easier to grasp for the london crowd. As it is, it makes it easier to both visualise the data and understand how close things are. It's been received fairly well - after the inital launch on the UK Bloggers mailing list, about 100 of the london based subscribers added their blog. Since then, the number of weblogs on the map has risen to almost 350. I didn't think there were that many bloggers in london.

2. Sorry to ask something so general, but what's the basic idea behind the project - what were/are you hoping to achieve with the site? How do you see it developing?

The basic idea was to visualise the dispersal of the community. We knew that there were quite a few webloggers in london - we sometimes meet up - but no one knew how many or where they were. Coupled with my interest in mapping and the tube, it seemed like a fun thing to do.

As for future developments, I haven't got anything planned. As a proof of concept it works fine, but it doesn't really have any millage as-is. Unless anyone wanted to start a blogger bookclub in their area or something similar :)

3. I seem to be covering lots of different areas in this story - adding geodata to the web, collaborative mapping, alternative location based services, localised social software... But being a journalist I have to come up with some sort of snappy/glib catch-all name for the story - I'm thinking of talking about it all as 'grassroots GIS' - do you think this is an accurate/useful way to sum up what people are doing? Any ideas about something better?

That's one way of thinking about it - the other is that people are trying to relate the structure of the web the physical structures than non-web people can understand. It's a bit of a paradigm shift in the way we visually imagine things are stuctured online.

4. Why do you think there's so much interest at the moment, at grassroots level, in adding geographical information to the web - in webmapping?

I would imagine it's because, up to now, it hadn't occured to anyone. If it's an effort to un-mystify the web a little by bringing it closer to our everyday life experiences, then perhaps it's because of the continual shift from geek to chic that the web is undergoing.

5. Now I've started looking, it seems an awful lot of people are working away in this area in different ways. What do you think are the most interesting projects/ideas.

I think geourl is pretty exciting - if something like that can spread and become a common standard, then that's where the fun will start. With readily available geo data on sites, people can start to build there down tools for navigating and catergorising sites. Imagine google having a "find other sites near this one" feature - that would be great.

6. I'm just beginning to look into this area - but I get the sense that people who are working on webmapping, geodata and alternative ideas for location-based services feel that they face a major obstacle in the form of the mapping organisations/government bodies, who keep mapping data locked up tight and don't want to share - what's your take on that? Is there a significant barrier to innovation in this area in the UK? Can you see links to the open source movement in general here? In particular, did you encounter any problems using the tube map?

The tube people are pretty flexible about their map getting around, as long as you're not trying to profit. But then the tube is very different to other transport infrastructure since (for now) it's all owned and mapped by one organisation. With the roads and whatnot it's a different thing altogether, since people who have maps have made them themselves and selling those maps is there business. Even postcode data costs money.

There are two viable ways forward as i see it. Either someone (like UMS) buys the data and provides it a controlled way, for free, or someone starts a free geo service. GeoURL is using latitude and longtitude data, so it's pretty easy to build anything on top of that.

7. As I said, I'm still exploring what's going on - but part of this whole webmapping thing seems to be an attempt to provide some kind of alternative people-driven take on the idea of location-based services, something more interesting than the visions of advertising keyed to where you happen to be. Do you think there's a clear divide between the grassroots and the corporates - or do you think the big companies know that people don't want location-based spam and are interested to see what the grassroots can come up with? What kinds of location-based services would you like to see emerging? Which big companies are doing interesting things at the moment, in your opinion?

The big companies know that people don't want spam full stop, but they also know it works, so location based spam is unfortunately inevitable until some better laws get passed.

As for location based services i'd like to see, I don't think there are many useful ones. We already have UMS's find-my-nearest for goods, and UMS's conversations for social interaction. I'd like to see the UMS services extended out into other companies though - local usergroups for software, interest sites, etc. if the UMS conversations stuff was freely available to integrate into your own site, that could become interesting - but then UMS are a company and have to make money somewhere :)

8. When the net/web first took off, the hype was that this was another world, a new frontier (the whole cyberspace idea) - you were able to escape the limitations of location - distance was dead etc etc. Now it seems that things are moving in the opposite direction - with more and more people online, the net can be used to help you get more out of your immediate location. Any thoughts on this?

People are starting to reaslise that the power of the net is in commnunication, not just long-range communication. The average person knows more people in their immediate vicinity than across the other side of the world, so it follows naturally that the people you communicate most with would be around you.

Although escaping the limitations of location is a good thing, that's not to say that we want or need to ignore the fact that location exists. Until we all get plugged into the web, matrix style, we need to be able to talk to people far away, while realising that they *still are* far away.