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Brodersen, Lars

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Column: Can the GIS-Community Build a Pyramid on the Moon?



Written by Lars Brodersen

Sunday, 06 September 2009



If all the world's best GIS-minds were brought together and put in a room (with plenty of CocaCola and pizza supply), what could happen? Could they construct 'a pyramid with a pumping heart on the moon'? Could they construct something that would stand for another 5000 years (as the pyramids)? Could they construct something that definitely would change the direction of man's life (in a positive sense like e.g. the alphabet)? Could they construct something mind-blowing like bringing man onto the moon?

The Egyptians built the pyramids long time ago(an achievement that would be hard to carry out even today). The Americans brought man to the moon with less computer power than available in my mobile telephone. Vital organs can be moved from one person to another, and the receiving person can live.

The alphabet made it possible to keep information outside man's memory. As well as many more inventions that have changed the direction of man's life or that are of stunning greatness; the wheel, gunpowder (maybe not the smartest invention), computers, electricity etc. Now, the question is: Can the GIS-community build a pyramid with a pumping heart on the moon? How big, how great can the GIS-community construct? If all the world's best GIS-minds were brought together and put in a room (with plenty of CocaCola and pizza supply), what could happen?

Could they construct 'a pyramid with a pumping heart on the moon'? Could they construct something that would stand for another 5000 years (as the pyramids)? Could they construct something that definitely would change the direction of man's life (in a positive sense like e.g. the alphabet)?

Could they construct something mind-blowing like bringing man onto the moon? I don't know. But why not try it? Why not bring the best GIS-minds together for a speed-contest e.g. during a congress/convention? Give them the task to construct a tool that makes it possible for ordinary people to be part of web 2.0. Equal conditions for all the participating GIS-minds: Here is a given dataset, use freeware/open source software and distribute as a web-solution available to everyone, and the result must allow ordinary people to transmit information through Google Earth (or similar services). Quality parameters for the contest:

The result must be as easy to use as sending an SMS (or as easy to use like the old fashion payphone on the street where you had to put a coin and then just dial the number of the person to whom you wanted to speak). Aren't we already there due to the GPS-navigators for the car (or in the mobile telephone), due to Google Earth & Maps?

Aren't we already there due to the web-services here and there and all over distributing information on e.g. the traffic situation around a city, or information on the weather right now and for the next three hours? Yes, or rather no. All these achievements are definitely excellent. But are they really the biggest, the greatest possible achievable by the GIS-community?

The GPS-navigator is maybe the thing that gets closest to something really big. Everybody knows now where he/she is. In addition to that everything also knows where it is. Therefore everybody knows where everything is, and that even in relation to the person's own position (where did I leave my car, where is my wife, where is that dammed hotel, what is the best direction at this junction etc.).

Orientation and navigation is no longer that big deal as it used to be. However, the usage of GPS-navigators does still presume the user to be in possession of some technical skills, and often they even presume the user to be able to understand a map! Further, who invented these GPS-navigators? Were it people from the GIS-community or from other domains? Google Earth & Maps are exquisite achievements! Maps and pictures from all around the world available to everybody free of charge.

Google Earth has definitely opened many, many people's eyes (and minds) to the wonderful world of maps. And it is close to a mind blowing thing. The only disadvantage is that it still is a one-way transmission of information (seen from the perspective of ordinary people). Ordinary people can still just look at it - just like one way transmissions have been for many, many years.

Sorry! I don't want to be rude. But that is what it is for ordinary people. Seen from the user's perspective Google Earth (and similar services) is providing stunning and mind blowing content, but the form as well as the interaction are representing a one way transmission just like one way transmissions always have been. Not much new in it here. Sorry (again)!

The users can not use Google Earth (and similar services) for their purposes. The users can just eat the information provided by Google Earth, and that's it. The users can not take an active role and transmit their information. Well, a few can (start their own transmission). Those who can do some programming (reaching from small computer nerds and upwards) can use Google Earth (and similar services) for their purposes.

The rest of us are helpless stuck and cannot get into the wonderful world of information-transmission and information-communication through web 2.0. What a pity, as there are so many people out there who have a lot of stories to tell and no transmission channel. Web 2.0 could be the channel, but where are the necessary tools for all us programming-ignorants?

If the GIS-community could construct a tool that would make it possible for ordinary people to be part of web 2.0, including the wonderful world of maps, then I would say that something really, really great and stunning has been created! That would really be something remarkable that would stand for a long time!

Why not construct the necessary tools that makes it possible for ordinary people to create solid, valuable information-transmission and solid, valuable information-communication through e.g. Google Earth (Google Maps or similar)? It must be as easy to use (for ordinary people) as sending a SMS (or using a payphone).

Make it possible for ordinary people to be part of Web 2.0 - please! So, why not organize a speed-contest at a congress to see what would be possible to achieve? Bring the brightest minds together, lock them up in a room (along with litres of CocaCola and tons of pizzas) for 24 hours or 48 hours and see what could happen. Only freeware and open-source should be allowed so that other people can continue the revolutionary development. The slogan will be: 'Bring web 2.0 to ordinary people'; the ordinary people's stories are needed.

Lars Brodersen is Assistant Professor in the Department of Development and Planning at Aalborg University, Denmark. He is an expert in the field of Geo-communication for Geo-information.

Information: lars@land.aau.dk [lars@land.aau.dk](http://www.land.aau.dk/~lars) www.land.aau.dk/~lars
www.geokommunikation.dk

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