

eIUS: Neo-Geography Experience Report 2

In the text: Some barriers in ‘{...}’ to provide more contextual information.

Interviewee profile

Senior Researcher at the Centre for Advanced Spatial Analysis (CASA) at University College London; also researcher in the GeoVUE (now GENeSIS) node of the National Centre of e-Social Science (NCeSS)

Time spent in research

100% – “Almost a hundred percent of my time; I think all of our work is research.”

Research area

“It’s a mix of **3D architecture, urban planning, geography and outreach**; the last two years we’ve been working on **mapping sites**, we’ve also built **3D London** for the Mayor which covers London within the M25 within a 3D view, and to coincide with that we’ve done various **Google Mapping work and Goole Earth work**. The most recent thing is the **Radio 4 Credit Crunch survey** which went onto the **BBC front page** at lunchtime, and that’s running now, and this is **real time geographic surveys** which **links in the normal research work but it’s very much public outreach**, so within this survey we’ll probably have something like a hundred thousand inputs in a relatively short time, so it’s just looking at how you can take **your normal research lab work** which is only used by people who are in the same line of work and using the **power of web 2.0 and blogs** to get the work much more widely seen and used.”

Research question(s)

“My line of work is seeing the latest tools, seeing what’s out there, running with it and just making things work in a very short period of time, so therefore our research questions and our interests are almost in flux, but they’re always along the same loins of how to communicate geographic information to the public as a whole to give the public a more informed view of the world that’s around them.”

“We want to give them [=people] new tools that gives them new ways to do what they want to do but not just from a public point of view, from a researcher point of view to social science outreach.”

Research Lifecycle

Start of the research process: unorthodox (in terms of Literature Review)

“Well I come from a **very unorthodox lab**; I don’t think we do things the way normal universities do; we have a **free remit to run with whatever we think is good**, and I think that’s why you get **new software packages coming out the lab and new thoughts** because we’re not told to do this, we’re not told to do that; it’s **very much blog based** too so we do about **three or four blog posts every day** and

that makes us think a lot more of what's out there and what's new because you have readers on the blog and **our blog gets about three thousand readers each day**, and you know if you don't **post the latest good research thoughts** your readers just move on, so that forces us to always be thinking of new work and cup wind of the latest stuff, and because we're in that mindset I think we keep on the edge of what's out there, and we either **create new tools or we use new tools or people write in to us and tell us the latest things out there, and lots of our work comes from thinking 'wouldn't it be great if...'** (..) and the **first research point would be then to get online and search sites like YouTube or Make or a whole range of sites** for people who have perhaps done the same thing, and if people haven't done the same thing then we sit down and think of how it can be done and perhaps begin writing a code to solve it."

(No) literature review: "Yes, perhaps I have a slightly non-academic view of it, but I find **literature reviews to be a complete waste of space** and I just hate going into meetings with people and saying, you know, let's think about doing this, let's meet again in three months time; I'm a great believer that these things in a web 2.0 world have a very short shelf life and you should just go and do it there and then. Perhaps I'm wrong; I'm not sure."

Data collection process and data analysis in the widest sense

"Yes, there are still points where we go on to **MyMaps** or various other sites and we **download the ordinance survey maps or postcodes**, etcetera, but we made something called the **MapTube** site for people to upload to us using the web 2.0 power (..); because you could spend too much time looking at datasets when you can just put a call out on the **blog** and they will send it to you or they would put you into a link, so in some ways, even though there's only about fifteen or so people in our open lab at any one time, you know there's about three thousand people online that you can also tap into and ask."

Example real time survey (also see under '**Research area**' for more details): "I think the best thing was the **real time survey stuff**, because it's all very well putting out a real time survey tool, but you need to get users in, and you can talk about the power of web 2.0 all you want, but it's a very niche stuff, suddenly when you get down to the geographical survey questions, even if your site's got loads of hits you're only going to get two hundred people using [it] a day, at which point we rang up Radio 4 and they used the tool and then **suddenly you get twenty two thousand hits**, so there's a lesson there that **even though it's an online world, as a researcher you have to use the classic media routes, too.**" And the "current Radio 4 [event] is a geographical credit crunch survey, so you put in the first bit of the post code and you say whether you're worried about your mortgage, the price of food, whether you're worried about losing your job, and the interesting thing is that we ran the same thing six months back and we had about forty thousand inputs; most of the UK were worried about the price of fuel and this latest one's only just launched but it seems like the UK is worried about losing their job now, so it shows a mood shift."

The example continues on preparing the data for the output on the website: "The **site does it all automatically in real time**, so it just runs and then it remakes the map every half hour, and because the map's already made we don't have to do much of a manual job, but if we want to have a look at the map a little bit closely: **we will grab**

all of the post codes and we'll grab all of the inputs and the text file and convert it to a CSB file which then goes into every arc map, and then we can do some higher end research with it.”

Some work has to be done manually: In the underlying data for the maps “(..) we also have a time field there so we know when the public were worried about the price of food or the price of fuel so we can do a mood map hour by hour for the last few months, but that’s obviously not what the website does so that takes a little bit of hand tweaking work which actually took our guy here about a day and a half to work on.”

Development of the GMap Creator – Research, Web 2.0 and outreach

The **GMap Creator** (<http://www.casa.ucl.ac.uk/software/gmapcreator.asp>) “was made because lots of our work is **mapping based** – and to create maps is just far too hard and you've got to be masters trained and you've got to own twenty thousand pounds worth of software, and **we created this little piece of software which we put out free of charge which allowed people to open their high end GIS type map and just click process and save and it automatically created a website for you to share that map**, and whereas that sounds a very simple tool, to go through the normal GIS software, to make **that work would often be a day's work and we've cut it down to ten minute's work**, and it's aimed at people who do still know about maps, so local Council outreach sort of things, and it's also aimed at the outreach copyright point of view.”

Learning from a previous case: “(..) we have **Virtual London** from the M25 in **3D form**”; **BUT** they did run into a problem with copyright: {“ordinance survey wouldn't allow us to publish it online, so we were two years ahead of the other research labs and because ordinance survey refused us to pay licence to put it online for public outreach they basically lost us six years of research time and we sat down and we licked our wounds and we tried to find a way to allow local councils to publish their work online without ordinance survey saying you can't put that map online or you can't publish that”}}

So for the **GMap Creator** they changed strategy and “erased ordinance survey copyright and for ease of use, and to put something out there that was just free and that just worked and I don't have the exact numbers to hand but **I think it's been downloaded about seventy thousand times** which therefore makes me think that perhaps we should've actually charged for it, but hey, lesson learned.”

Collaboration

“(..) we have an open plan lab and we often just say ‘wouldn't it be great if we could do this...’”; there are about 15 people working in the lab;

“We use **Access Grid** to meet every month NCeSS-wise, and that's useful, but to be honest the Access Grid work and the NCeSS once a month thing is the only time we actually do that sort of work; most of the other times we probably go via **email and phone**; old fashioned I guess.”

Difference between blog (=outreach) and collaboration: “But the blog's not the same thing as working; (..) the **blog is slightly remote so you know your readers are there, your readers comment and indeed rate your work, so it's fantastic as an outreach** and it's useful for the odd thought, but I can't say that I work with the

people that read the blog. **The people that I work with or the people I write graphs with, I just ring up.**

On writing in collaboration: “Yeah, it works more in the traditional way; we normally **email people first** and say shall we write this, but we all **write online** now; we don’t use word; we write online where it’s shared and we can all **write at exactly the same time.**” And “all of my writing is **in the cloud somewhere** and actually not on my local drive, which is actually worrying but it means that we can write all of our research papers online and we know wherever we log in at whatever time, it’s always saved and it’s **always shared**, and someone else has probably added another thousand words. In fact I’m working on a grant now and we’re writing this **online via a shared work system**. I can’t remember what the system’s called; it is something word but it’s not Microsoft based.” Also Google Docs is not used: “don’t like it much because you can’t see when people are typing at the same time, whereas in this one you can; it is completely shared.”

Dissemination

“Well obviously the **blog’s the main thing**, whenever a publication is written we put it out as a **working paper** first, so we have about five hundred working papers in our lab now and we instantly put that online as a rough draft and I’m aware that the world has changed but the academic world hasn’t; you still have to do your **classic RAE type route, so we do the normal academic publication** but I’m well aware that these papers take a year to come out and they’re going to be read by about twenty people, but you have to do that route because that’s the way the current academic system works, but from a working paper point of view we put that out first and that gets about thirty thousand readers, so we’re waiting for the academic system to catch up, so we **aim to publish most of our work using online journals now because their clearance is a lot quicker.**”

They submitted to the **JASSS journal** (Journal of Artificial Societies and Social Simulation: <http://jasss.soc.surrey.ac.uk/>), which is a proper peer-reviewed journal, with the process only taking about 2 weeks: “(..) this is where our agent based second life paper’s coming out and it has a clearance time of about two weeks. Even though it is quick, it is a proper online refereed journal.”

On sharing all possible research outputs, tools and data: “(..) all of our work’s just online because we’re very aware that we are a research lab; someone pays our wage which is taxes and therefore we should be willing to openly share whatever we do, which we openly do. (..) there’s papers, there’s links, you can download the source code.” The centre (CASA) is promoting this.

Other important elements about/in the research

{{Real world security risk example=barrier: “Yeah, one example comes to mind; we wanted to do a 3D tube map, so we’ve got a London tube map with all the lines in the right place, but we wanted to give them depth and London Transport wouldn’t give us the depth map, so we put a call out on their blog for people when they get the tube to work, to count the number of steps down to the platform and that would give us a rough guess of depth and therefore we could sink each of the locations down according to a rough guess depth map, and that went very well; we got quite a few

inputs, but then London Transport rang us up and said look, we know you're doing this work, we suggest you stop the work because it's a security risk, and it's at that point where you realise that you can call on people that read the blog but even though I've said we just go ahead and we get things done as quick as we can, there are times when you haven't quite thought it through and therefore London Transport asked us to drop the work and we subsequently dropped it. Lesson learned."}}