

## Human sacrifice; dogs and cats living together; mass hysteria

**Martin Daly, Technical Director, Cadcorp**

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### Introduction

Can the approaches, tools, data sources, data formats and techniques used by the self-styled "Neogeographers" on the one hand, and those used by the self-conscious "Professional GIS" community - henceforth referred to by the somewhat cruel "Paleogeography" label - on the other, be reconciled without reverting to holy war? Can they "all get just along" together, or is "mass hysteria" inevitable?

The world of Paleogeography, for so long confined to - but desperate to break out of - a small but important niche, was just poking its collective head over the parapet by embracing fledgling de facto and de jure standards, and finding its way into mainstream IT, when it was comprehensively blindsided by the rise and rise of Neogeography, sometimes somewhat sniffily referred to as "consumer mapping".

With Neogeography gaining publicity and kudos that Paleogeography can only dream of, it has been easy for the latter to sneer at the former as "not really GIS", while simultaneously being labelled as slow moving and out-of-touch.

This paper does not seek to show that the approach, toolset or data formats of one is better or worse than the other, but instead will outline that there are not only many areas of overlap between the two seemingly disparate worlds, but that they also share a common fundamental purpose.

### In the beginning

In the late 1960's, 1970's and early 1980's, when the new breed of computer software for making maps was being used for the first time, it seems likely that the incumbent, paper-based, geographers sneered at the new computer scientists in much the same way as many Paleogeographers sneer at Neogeographers today.

Of course many of those that fall into today's Paleogeography category were the ones being sneered at twenty years ago, and should perhaps know better than to treat today's Neogeographers in the same way.

### Shake, rattle and roll

Many areas of human endeavour stagnate sooner or later, and end up in need of shaking up from time to time.

While Paleogeography cannot be reasonably accused of being stagnant in the last decade or two - with many new software suppliers of multiple hues, and moves, however crude, into spatial databases, server-based GIS, and web-based GIS - there can be no doubt that Google's dual acquisitions of the technology behind Google Maps (from Where 2 Technologies) and Google Earth (from Keyhole Inc.) in 2004, and particularly their subsequent popularity, gave the world of professional GIS an altogether unexpected shock.

### Look back in anger

Adding to the shock (and awe) of the rise of Google Maps and Google Earth was the follow-on run-away success of "mashups"; something that Google themselves did not foresee, and indeed originally tried to block before belatedly realising their value.

Paleogeographers scoffed at the idea that a mashup was something new. After all, hadn't they been doing exactly that - bringing disparate datasets together and overlaying them - all along? Wasn't that the whole point of GIS?

Well, yes, but what Paleogeographers were doing in isolation in their own projects, or perhaps even latterly on a corporate or public sector website, was not really seen by the vast majority of the public, and certainly not with the ease-of-use of Google Maps and similar products from other suppliers.

Even the previous giants of consumer web mapping, such as MapQuest and Microsoft MapPoint, were blindsided.

Paleogeographers in general, and GIS software suppliers in particular, had been trying to extricate themselves from an IT niche; trying to demonstrate that spatial was no longer special, but merely another attribute type (like a date only harder). The rise and rise of mashups has, at best, delayed this one giant leap, and at worst made it near impossible.

### Generation Neo

With Paleogeographers shell-shocked, and GIS software vendors rushing hither and yon to add me-too support for the new kids on the block in the shape of Google Earth (now OGC) KML, Neogeography, based at first more or less exclusively on Google Maps, was born.

Neogeographers showed that it was extremely easy to stick a few points or lines or polygons on a map. This deceptively simple combination proved - thanks to the largess of the likes of Google and Microsoft and the resulting free access to base datasets of previously unthinkable coverage and quality - much more than good enough.

Indeed it was not only good enough for websites that previously had no maps at all, but also good enough for websites that had previously relied on Paleogeography software.

Instead of seeing this trend as being a rising tide that floats all boats, some Paleogeographers saw it as a direct threat to their core business, and, accordingly panicked.

In the same way that some Paleogeographers over-reacted, so did some Neogeographers who declared GIS as-was, in effect, dead.

### Living Apart Together

What both groups missed in their rush to judgements was the common ground between them.

Both groups support and use - and in some cases rely on - overlapping sets of flat file data formats old (such as Shapefile, and GeoTIFF) and new (such as OGC KML). Similarly, they often rely on spatially-enabled database backends.

On a technical level, the software built and used by both groups often relies on the same low-level libraries.

And, while the Neogeographers have understood and used the web - often having a web background instead of a geography background - much better than the Paleogeographers, this gap has been reduced of late.

Neogeography is not standing still of course, and is increasingly implementing more of the hard-core analysis that is fundamental to Paleogeography. Thus some of the Paleogeography snobbery about Neogeography not understanding scale, or coordinate reference systems, and other core GIS functionality must inevitably fade away.

### Can we all just get along?

As the differences between Neogeography and Paleogeography reduce, the two camps must begin to get along. More and more users will require this. These users will continue to use Paleogeography software for many parts of their day-to-day work, and will continue to expect Neogeography-style websites and mashups in order to best present their work on the web.

Each group must swallow their collective pride, set aside their collective prejudices, and recognise that their common ground is not only significant, but easy to spot just by looking at their respective monikers: geography.

And, of course, the two groups will find themselves usurped in the future when the next generation of Neogeographers appears with new assumptions, new shortcuts, and new success. Hopefully today's Neogeographers will be more gracious than today's Paleogeographers, and will embrace NeoNeogeography and "all just get along."