Book Reviews
Geographical Mashups

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Google Maps Hacks
Rich Gibson and Schuyler Erle
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Not so long ago, using maps on the Web was difficult. If you could find them at all, they were ugly and slow to load and came with clunky user interfaces. This has all changed thanks to the Google Map service. In recent years, commercial sites such as Amazon, eBay, and Google have increasingly become platforms that support complex user ecosystems. Using openly published APIs, you can look up an item on Amazon, get a price history from eBay, and find reviews on Google—all at once, and all without Amazon, eBay, or Google ever talking with each other.

Up until now, however, a crucial component has been lacking: location. Location could have been integrated in the past, but it would have been through a cost-prohibitive, complicated proprietary solution. There might even have been open source systems, but they would have been also complicated and difficult for all but the skilled cartographer. Google Maps, however, provides an open interface for creating applications that integrate maps with available location data. For instance, http://housingmaps.com plots housing rental and for-sale listings from Craigslist on a Google map. Neither Craigslist nor Google was involved in this undertaking, and the result was greater than the sum of its parts. This is an example of a mashup. Google Maps Hacks by Rich Gibson and Shuyler Erle explains how to make the most of Google Maps, however deeply you plan to use it. Whether you need to look around the surrounding environment, present some location-tagged photos, or create new applications that combine map data with personal data, you’ll find the tools and inspiration you need to create your own mashups.

A logical approach

The book presents 70 hacks in seven chapters. Chapter 1 provides a gentle introduction to navigating the world in Google Maps and sharing and generating links from a spreadsheet. Chapter 2 introduces the API and explains how to add a map to a Web site, create a route in a few simple clicks, and map a slideshow of your travels. Chapter 3 explains how to create mashups such as weather, news, and package tracking. Chapter 4 concentrates more on travel mashups such as avoiding traffic jams, navigating public transport, and retrieving driving directions for more than two locations. Chapter 5 presents hacks such as geotagging photos on Flickr, geoblogging with Google Maps in Thingster, and generating geocoded RSS. Chapter 6 provides a number of well-thought-out API tips and tricks, while chapter 7 presents extreme Google Maps hacks.

Google Maps Hacks logically outlines how to exploit the mapping capabilities of Google Local, whether exploring it through the Web interface or integrating personal data. Gibson and Erle also demonstrate how to take advantage of Google’s location search interfaces and map navigation shortcuts.
No more traffic tickets

The book spends significant time clearly explaining how to create links to Google’s maps and to place markers on the map. Gibson and Erle provide excellent examples of mashup sites that have combined Google maps with other data. The book also discusses how to use Google maps for navigation, wardriving (that is, looking for Wi-Fi hotspots), and even beating a traffic ticket. In fact, the traffic ticket hack alone (#41) is worth the money.

Google Maps Hacks is never a chore to read. Tips are scattered throughout, and a thermometer icon next to each hack indicates its relative complexity. Numerous screen shots accompany each hack to illustrate what’s taking place. The code segments never seem to detract from the text, and you can download them all from the authors’ Web site (http://mappinghacks.com/projects/gmaps). I was actually in awe of Gibson and Erle once I started to delve into this book. It really is a tour de force, and I suspect that this book will become a core text for developers and researchers in this area.

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- DS Online's Web Systems Community
  (http://dsonline.computer.org/portal/site/dsonline/index.jsp?pageID=dso_level1&path=dsonline/topics/was&file=index.xml&amp;xsl=article.xsl)
  (http://doi.ieeecomputersociety.org/10.1109/MCG.2007.39)
- "Scalable, Distributed, Real-Time Map Generation," IEEE Pervasive Computing
  (http://doi.ieeecomputersociety.org/10.1109/MPRV.2006.83)

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