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Back Talk -- GIS Induced Guilt

Anthony (Tony) W. Ferguson
University of Hong Kong, ferguson@hkucc.hku.hk

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Back Talk — GIS Induced Guilt

Column Editor: **Anthony (Tony) W. Ferguson** (Library Director, University of Hong Kong; Phone: 852 2859 2200; Fax: 852 2858 9420) <ferguson@hkucc.hku.hk>

I just returned from the **2002 Pacific Neighborhood Consortium (PNC)** meeting held in Osaka, Japan. The result of my attendance is that I am now trying to figure out what I want to do about **GIS**. For a number of years **GIS** has been a professional guilt trip for me. I'll have to admit that I have had little idea what it meant beyond computers, maps, and some people seem to be very passionate about them. **GIS** really might as well as meant "guilt induced stupor" as far as I was concerned. In my own defense, I will say that these feelings have not been solely self-induced. At **Columbia** we hired a very bright young librarian who had been heavily into **GIS** at an unnamed Midwest university and she said that while it was wonderful, few patrons seemed to be able to use it and almost no one seemed capable of making **GIS** digital objects. These words allowed me to file **GIS** along with a lot of other things I have promised myself to do, e.g., run five miles a day, stop chewing my nails, loose 50 pounds, etc., etc.

But the **PNC** conference experience has definitely been unsettling. Some of the **GIS** presentations have caused me to reassess what **GIS** means, as in "gosh it's stupendous." Before proceeding further into this attempt at getting you also to feel guilty, let me refer you to a few definitions obtained from the Web (where else) supplied by some group called the **International Plant Genetic Resources Institute**.

GIS is:

An information system that is designed to work with data referenced by spatial or geographic coordinates. In other words, a **GIS** is both a database system with specific capabilities for spatially-referenced data, as well as a set of operations for working [analysis] with the data (Star and Estes, 1990).

A system for capturing, storing, checking, integrating, manipulating, analyzing and displaying data which are spatially referenced to the Earth (Chorley, 1987).

A system of hardware, software, and procedures designed to support the capture, management, manipulation, analysis, modeling and display of spatially-referenced data for solving complex planning and management problems (NCGIA lecture by David Cowen, 1989).

Put simply, **GIS**, seems to mean super cool computerized maps/atlas and linked textual data for just about any topic: very right brain,

visual. A co-sponsor of the **PNC** meeting was **ECAI**, the **Electronic Cultural Atlas Initiative (ECAI or ee k eye** — which brings to mind how do you say **GIS**? Chinese friends seem to say giss as in giss me Kate, while we westerners say **GIS** as in **FBI**). If you go to the **ECAI** Website at **Berkeley** (<http://ecai.org/>) you are both quickly impressed and hit with guilt feelings once again. Impressed, because this site has simply wonderful data. Guilty because you quickly discover your PC is not set up to let you view all of the data, you know that making it easy to link to a site like this is only the beginning, and you are not ready to devote the human and fiscal resources to making this happen on every terminal in your library.

The **ECAI** site has a Projects option which leads you to a list of 300 **GIS** databases ranging from the **African Linguistic Project**, to the **GIS of Salem Witchcraft**, to the **Xuanzang** and the **Silk Road** project. The latter

refers to the seventh century travels of a Chinese Buddhist monk through what is now known as Tibet and India. The richness of the data is wonderful and again guilt producing. The latter because you will discover that browsers need to be set so that the Chinese characters don't appear as a jumble of question marks, asterisks, etc., — more tasks for already over-burdened library systems departments (not at my institution but I assume this is the case at most of yours). Another option at the **ECAI** site is the list of "Featured Projects" utilizing what is known as **TimeMap** infrastructure. Here you can view all sorts of wonderful things such as a time map showing the expansion and retraction of the **Mongol** empire that threatened Europe in the 1200's.

Another presentation at **PNC** that was simply terrific was given by **David Rumsey** of **Cartography Associates** (<http://www.davidrumsey.com/index.html>). See also <http://www.davidrumsey.com/rumsey.pdf> for a copy of a magazine article about Rumsey and his maps). His presentation was entitled "Japan Mapped: Historical Maps for Digital Display and Research." It was so good that I thought "great, and how much will it cost to let my library's users at these wonderful resources?" I was almost disappointed when the answer was "they are free." **Rumsey** is a private citizen with a passion to share his

map collection and **GIS** lets him do that with the world.

Looking at just these sorts of things forces me to lapse back into one of my favorite digressions: our **OPACs** should link to sites like this. If we are in the information business — and not in the **BUY** books, videos, databases, **eJournals** business — then a search in our catalogs should link one to the **ECAI Silk Road Atlas** "Mongol Video" that has the time map to which I just referred. We just can't allow our "my catalog lists what my library owns" fixation to continue. Expecting our users to go to **Google**, or to well-groomed haystacks of Web pages, is not enough. Unless our catalogs link patrons to the best information that is out there — we, like the carriage makers who didn't understand they were in the transportation business, will be left sitting in the dust while automobiles/the Web speed away.

I guess the question now for me, and perhaps some of you, is to decide how to reframe feelings of guilt for not using **GIS** and turn them into actions designed to expand the breadth and depth of information resources made available to my library's user community.

It occurs to me that I have at least two courses of action: participate in the **GIS** phenomena at least to the extent that my library makes these resources easy to locate and use; or, go out and hire or retrain someone to be a trained **GIS** librarian and set about developing some **GIS** digital objects. To do the former, at a minimum, means creating and publicizing a home page rich with **GIS** resources, making sure all library terminals are correctly configured, and then training students to be aware of and able to use them. At maximum and what we should be doing, means cataloging these objects using **Dublin Core** and letting users link to these resources in the same step as finding good books on the same topics. The latter case, hiring someone to develop **GIS** objects, is intriguing to think about. My library, expectedly perhaps, collects materials published in and about the city of Hong Kong (<http://lib.hku.hk/hkspc/collections.html>). We have scores of maps and thousands of pictures to go with many thousands of books and reports. These resources could be employed as fodder for a **GIS** database. For those of you who are already doing a great job with **GIS**: congratulations! 🍷

