Oops! Microsoft's Earth falls flat

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Created *29/07/2005 - 3:29pm*
Submitted by srlinuxx on Friday 29th of July 2005 03:29:50 PM Filed under [Microsoft](#) [1]

This week, poor Microsoft delivered a seminar in how not to launch a website. The release of their Virtual Earth site got the kind of word-of-mouth buzz that nobody wants: First, word went around that they were spiteful, but then they turned out to be merely incompetent.

It's a funny story. Virtual Earth is Microsoft's attempt to answer Google Maps; both are giant on-line maps of the planet that you can pan about in detail, zooming in to see side streets and then out to inspect whole continents.

(They are at virtualearth.microsoft.com and maps.google.com, respectively.)

Both mesh aerial photography with digital roadmaps to create little portals that contain the whole world -- in theory.

Virtual Earth arrived on the Net this week with much ballyhoo -- but none of it was from Microsoft. The first many heard of it were headlines like "Did Microsoft wipe Apple off the map?" Apparently, someone noticed that when you zoom the Microsoft Virtual Earth map to the location of rival Apple's headquarters in California, nothing but an industrial lot appears.

Even as Microsoft started issuing denials, it was obvious that they wouldn't have been so stupid as to doctor their maps. More likely, their aerial pictures were just out of date by a matter of years.

To verify this hypothesis, inquiring minds asked themselves, "What landmarks in America might have changed in, say, the last five years?" There was some hurried scrolling over to New York. And jarringly enough, there were the Twin Towers, standing tall in the face of reality. Virtual Earth, indeed.

And so, with another round of unpleasant commentary on this discovery, the Virtual Earth met the real Earth with a thud. Its disastrous entrance might have been forgettable, except the product itself isn't that good. Not only are the close-up images ancient, but they're a grainy black-and-white, and only of the United States. Google, by comparison, offers beautiful colour images of urban areas worldwide, all taken since 2002.

It turns out that the imagery that Microsoft used for Virtual Earth comes from an old Microsoft website called Terraserver, which has been lingering on-line since 1997, with pictures dating as far back as 1991. If Virtual Earth wasn't belatedly slapped together from old parts to compete with Google, it certainly looks like it was. Microsoft emphasizes that Virtual Earth is still a "beta" product -- which means it's unfinished and buggy, but the fact is that Microsoft came to market six months late with a second-rate product.

This comes at a time when things are getting really interesting at Google. Their maps are becoming a lingua franca for sharing geographical information on-line, in a way that clunky older systems like MapQuest never did. Links to Google

Maps are starting to appear in rental classifieds and party invitations: casual uses that show people are using it as a tool, not a technology.

And Google has opened up its system so that amateur programmers can add their own overlays to Google's maps. Already people are adding subway maps to their hometowns, or annotating satellite views of London with markers showing exactly where the attackers struck. As this gets easier, expect to see Google maps get dragooned into service any time someone on-line needs to show what happened where.

What the Net makes with Google's stuff is a story to watch; Microsoft is planning innovations of its own, and Microsoft has refined derivative, derided software into winners more than once. (There was this one called "Windows.") Tempting to say that the consumer wins, but still, given the week that was, Microsoft lost.

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