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Map Hacks on Crack

Ryan Singel 07.02.05 | 2:00 AM

SAN FRANCISCO -- The internet's two largest search engines are begging to get hacked.

On Wednesday, Google opened a set of [programming interfaces](#) for its popular [Google Maps](#) service, in the hope hackers will overlay the maps with data from outside sources -- such as wireless cafes.



[See photos](#)

Just one day later, Yahoo announced its own set of [programming tools](#) for its map service, [Yahoo Maps](#).

Both companies are hoping the new mapping APIs, or [application programming interfaces](#), will excite developers, help the companies find new employees and, perhaps most importantly, result in free product prototyping.

But the search giants were also reacting in no small part to web hackers who had already started to reverse-engineer the two mapping services in ways neither had expected.

"We are doing this because they were already doing it," said Google Maps product manager Bret Taylor, half jokingly, at [Where 2.0](#), a new [O'Reilly Media](#) conference focusing on innovations in mapping and location-based services.

Outlining Google's new offerings, Taylor stressed that Google is a company of engineers that wants to foster a network of developers and provide a formal way to work with outside programmers.

"Frankly we like new and innovative solutions," Taylor said. "We expect new and creative ideas to come out of this that we haven't thought of yet."

Before Google opened the Maps API, several "mashups" had been created, including Paul Rademacher's [housing map](#), which layers craigslist housing ads onto Google maps, and an [anti-gridlock site](#) that marries Yahoo traffic data with Google maps. There's also Adrian Holovaty's ingenious [Chicago crime map](#), which lets users create custom views of crimes from auto theft to bribery on maps as tiny as [individual police beats](#).

Other hacks include a [small-town walking tour](#) with annotations, a map with clickable [London traffic cameras](#) and a map for finding cheap gasoline that's no longer online.

Rademacher's Google-craigslist hack earned him a star role at Where 2.0. Tim O'Reilly, the web-trend predictor at the helm of the O'Reilly publishing company, sees the future of the internet in these innovative, unpaid hacks.

"Google Maps with craigslist is the first Web 2.0 application," O'Reilly said, referring to his belief that the future of the internet will be created from interlocking connections of open data services that will be constantly improved and tweaked.

The API announcements illustrate that both companies are serious about devoting resources to outside projects that the companies have little control over.

The APIs, which specify the rules for what kinds of data can be passed to the mapping server and how the maps can be used, require user documentation, updates and support forums.

Not surprisingly, the two companies have different rules.

Yahoo is a bit more flexible in the kinds of data that can be passed and uses several open data standards, including RSS. The company also hosts the resultant map on its own servers, which could save hackers from having to pay for expensive bandwidth if their application becomes popular. It also allows Yahoo to serve advertising, if it chooses. However, the hosting offer is not negotiable, even for geeks with deep pockets who want the map featured on their own website.

Google, on the other hand, expects developers to host their own hacks by running Google's innovative JavaScript to power the map's smooth rendering, but reserves the right to place ads next to the mashup map in the future.

Yahoo sees the legitimized hacking as another extension of its effort to turn its customers into participants. Its local service, [Yahoo Local](#), for example, attempts to merge blogging, restaurant reviews, social software and portable electronic devices.

Hackers, who had to constantly keep an eye on Google Maps for code changes to keep their jury-rigged applications running, welcomed the news. But they also had detailed questions about data specifications and gripes about the licenses.

"With this level of excitement around (Google Maps), it really makes sense for them to really foster development, instead of having people worry about their sites being taken down," Rademacher said.

They also started to build some Yahoo mapping hacks in less than 24 hours.

One such hacker married Yahoo's San Francisco Bay Area traffic data with live feeds from government traffic cameras to a [map of the Bay Area](#). Another created a [map-based tribute](#) to the wine-tasting buddy film Sideways.