

Beware the Jabberwock, or, Let's All Do the Techno-Oligarchic Slide

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Review

The Mutant, in this case, is capitalism. Isn't it always? But to be more specific: capitalism qua capitalism is not necessarily bad. Nor is it good. It's like a gun – guns alone rarely kill people. Unfettered access amid a culture of violence, however, does. Ultimately, then, it is legislation that brings the necessary restrictions on money trumping Good. Anarchy can do so temporarily, as was the case in the early days of the internet. But the lack of a central system of organization or control eventually leads to the centralization of capital, and those with more begin to impose their will in order to further benefit themselves – essentially creating the missing rules in their own interest. The current state of what we generally refer to as neoliberal capitalism has meant a void filled with brologarchs (Cadwalladr, 2024).

I recognize that this is a strange opening to a GIS trends article. What I'm leading to, though, is the now ubiquitous (in acceptance as an idea, and as a corporate ethos) notion coined by Cory Doctorow (2023), of enshittification. As Doctorow lays out in his Podcast Series Understood: Who Broke the

Internet (2025), in Google terms, this has been the gradual degradation of their platform for the purposes of keeping individuals engaged with it longer, in order to reap more advertising money. Many had noticed the internet broadly, and Google Search specifically, had been steadily getting worse, and we could now explain it.

Google Maps has been a long-standing tool for wayfinding, and a revolutionary one. Many – myself included – remember looking up directions in a map or city atlas, and either writing down the directions or later ruing that you didn't write down the directions because memories are occasionally fallible. Now, we just put it into Google Maps and get directions.

Google Maps began in 2005, after Google's 2004 acquisition of the company where2 (Crunchbase, n.d.). Map Maker was later added, allowing users to edit and make new maps, though this was then shut down in 2017 with "many of its features...integrated into Google Maps" (Google, n.d.a). Some of this was moved into the Local Guides program, where users volunteer to contribute to improving information for the multi-trillion dollar company, with the possibility of occasional "perks", by earning points, badges, and levels (Google, n.d.b). In short, they have gamified a process in order to acquire free labour, to improve their own income.

But where does the enshittification come in? Well, if you spend much time poking around Google Maps, you may have noticed that it's starting to slip, mostly, in what gets recommended when you search for businesses nearby. For some time that has been less "what I'm looking for" and more "here's who has paid us more". But in this case I'm more talking about the layers within, specifically the roads.

To give you a sense of what I'm referring to, I offer some examples. The first, in North Rustico, PEI, is relatively minor:



Figure 2 (Google, n.d.c.)

Though a bit difficult to see, if you look between the upper row of houses and the field north of them, the road layer is slightly offset from the small dirt track, and it ends long before the track. A tiny thing, perhaps of little consequence. But there are adjustments as well on the Trans Canada:



Figure 3 (Google, n.d.d.)

Here we see the highway near McMunn, Manitoba, mostly fine but ever so slightly off, drifting a little bit on the turn (never mind Birch River Rd taking a little trip to try to join the highway). Not big, and easily explained as

difficulties in aligning satellite data with a road layer. Though one would think a multi-trillion-dollar company could iron out such issues after 20 years.



Figure 4 (Google, n.d.e.)

In case you thought this was a rural issue, I offer this area near a school in Regina, Saskatchewan. Cities are generally much better aligned than rural areas, but still that first curved road is ever so slightly off from the rest, and you may notice a couple of other details that are best described as "squidgy".

But the pièce de résistance, and the one the first alerted me to this lackadaisical drift, comes from an exploration of Grand Narrows, in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia:

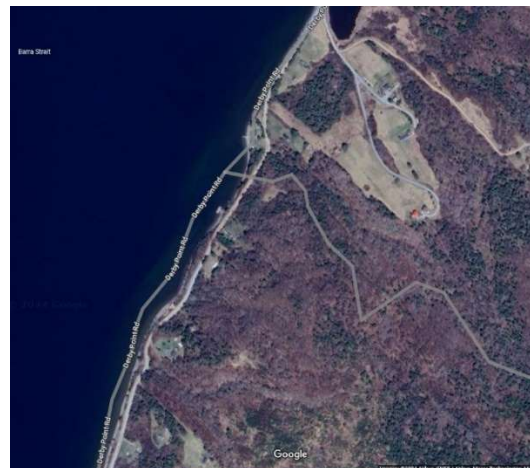


Figure 5 (Google, n.d.f.).

According to Google, the drive goes right into the Bras d'Or Lake, with an intersection that zigzags off to what can only be described as a suspect route into the woods, perhaps to grandmother's house. I've not driven past there myself, but the satellite imagery certainly doesn't give me much confidence in the reality of a road. If you try to follow Derby Point Rd south and east, you find more imaginative fun with roads layers, as well. Go even a little farther to find the curious case of Gordies Road(s), in Benacadie.

One might be inclined to point to how such details are so minute, so extreme to focus on. Look at the wonder that this technology is! And truly it is, having given a tool to many that allows great exploration and wayfinding. But whether that was done for the Good or not is the question we're starting to meet, and the answers are less than satisfactory. The slide will continue in a hundred little ways, not solely in layer alignment. And you'll be left to work a little more to get a little less, for this thing that purports to be free but profits deeply from manipulation.

Meanwhile, enshittification is catching on throughout the technosphere, from Software as a Service (SaaS) to attention addiction as profit margin to religious fervour for the little toys and the boys who promote them. Has it infected our mostly beloved GIS provider (beyond the aforementioned SaaS)? Not in many ways we've noticed, but then it's usually not so noticeable at first. Perhaps the recent shifting in StoryMaps was the canary, or perhaps it was just a short term pain for greater gain. Either way, as in anything in the technosphere: beware the Jabberwock.

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