

Esri's AI Assistants: Tricksy Tools, Worthy Work

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Review

Esri's [June 2026](#) updates have a suite of tweaks, additions, and toys to play with (Szukalski & Wrightsell-Hughes, 2026). Like many tech companies, they are certainly working hard to improve what they offer and ensure they keep advancing the technology. Users have plenty to work with in new 3D viewer options, inter-connected data operations tools, and analysis.

Like most of Silicon Valley, they are also jumping head first into the roiling waters of AI. [Multiple new](#) preview and beta "assistants" are being trotted out (ArcGIS Online, n.d.), currently for no extra cost (though one can expect that will change as soon as enough uptake and regular usage occurs that going back will be more troublesome for users). Business Analyst, StoryMaps, Drone2Map, and more have assistants to make your life more assistant-driven. A translation assistant is available in the Experience Builder, Instant Apps, and as part of Survey123, which can be a nice tool to help, though these tools do still need a proper translator to work best (which, as someone whose partner was a translator, most aren't doing that – AI is indeed intended

to replace you, regardless of what the tech sector is saying).

Of particular note, there is an [Item Details assistant](#), also launched in beta (ESRI, n.d.). This assistant is meant to increase and improve metadata. In an ideal world, I would say this could be a useful tool, given that creating good metadata (or any metadata) is more challenging outside of the information field. The promo video on the page even makes a tongue-in-cheek joke about this.

One quick button lets you create or enhance metadata, taking the human almost entirely out of the equation. Most disturbingly, the video promises the tool will "...make your content discoverable, and AI-ready" (emphasis added). Aside from the obvious threat this presents to people working in the information world, it also highlights a growing issue noted by rhetoricians, where AI is feeding AI, to feed more AI; the resulting AI Centipede is exactly as you'd expect. The most likely end goal is that humans will be removed from metadata entirely, such that the assistant will automatically add metadata to every item uploaded, regardless of it is good and accurate metadata, or if the item should even have metadata.

This remains in the "early adopters" realm of Esri for the moment. However, as they want people to join in to help "make metadata creation smarter, faster, and more impactful", one can only be left with a feeling of mild insult. We have people who can make metadata creation smarter, faster, and more impactful.

People are a real drag on value, when that money could go to the business. If that seems a cynical statement, it is. But in the context of AI, wealth collection has fully superseded people. In June, Esri published an article, ["What is the impact of data centres on property valuations?"](#) (Smith, 2026). It is a

standard use of GIS, analyzing home valuation by distance to data centres, and shouldn't bear much commentary but for the fact that the only human input is one of visual aesthetic – data centres "can be perceived as large, unattractive buildings...". They are also ecologically harmful (Erdem & Özdemir, 2024), acoustically harmful (Bosker, 2019), and an existential threat (Schneier & Sanders, 2026), but these aspects aren't mentioned (the acoustic harm could be argued to impact property valuations, though awareness of soundscapes outside of music and urban planning contexts is lower).

Ultimately as society continues to interrogate the realities of the digital revolution – as a reminder, the world wide web was opened to the public in 1993, just 36 years ago (Schafer & Thierry, 2019) – it bears considering the root purpose of the tools and processes involved. The web as a whole has been a net positive for information communication, but the value of LLMs remains less clear, and the pressures of enforced adoption – from workplaces requiring use to the common rhetoric of "you'll be left behind if you're not integrating it in everything" – are leading to bipartisan backlash (Warzel, 2026), not to mention an editor shifting from a simple editorial about new tools from Esri to deeper musings on generational social history. It does not pay to dehumanize in the pursuit of profit.

Users may find Esri's assistants helpful in their work, though.

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