

Open Source



Moving to the middle

By Victoria Kouyoumjian, Esri IT Strategies Architect

Recently, several of us at Esri had the opportunity to attend and support FOSS4G, the Free and Open Source Software for GIS conference, held this year in Denver, Colorado. Esri's sponsorship was large, with four speaking slots and a fully staffed booth. I'd like to think we were valuable contributors to this event, which seemed to be a terrific success with over 900 attendees.

When I became interested in open source and GIS at Esri, the geospatial community had an "us versus them" mentality. At the time, it also existed in the non-geo open source arena with Microsoft taking a hit. But over the past six or seven years, there has been a noticeable shift—a transformation in the IT industry resulting in a hybridization of technology portfolios, leveraging both open and closed source. In my observation, until recently, this trend towards a mixed source environment has been slower to be adopted in the geospatial community.

The largest glimmer of this shift happening was evidenced while at FOSS4G, with a majority of the attendees new to geospatial open source and unfamiliar with any of the historical baggage that some of us (like myself) have observed. Indeed, I have seen this move to the middle—leveraging of both open and closed source—within Esri as well. In the past few years, Esri has released several open source projects hosted on SourceForge, CodePlex, and Github, as well as making contributions to the GDAL [*Geospatial Data Abstraction Library*] project. It's hard to overlook the nearly 100 different open source APIs, libraries, and projects that the core ArcGIS system now consumes.

But time and again, many of us representing Esri at FOSS4G were asked directly, "What are you doing here?" (Most were polite.)

My response to geodevelopers, users, consultants, start-ups, SMBs [*small and medium businesses*], and large traditional organizations, closed and open alike: We're all in this together. If you want to further the cause and broaden the application of GIS, it's time to bridge the gap that apparently still exists in the geospatial community between open and closed source and transcend the bad game

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of tug-of-war that has been going on between and within these GIS partitions. The interesting thing about tug-of-war is that—unless the rope breaks—both sides are exhausted in the end.

I would posit that the schism that has divided the open and closed source GIS communities must be bridged if we (collectively) are to succeed with the universal objective of witnessing GIS as ubiquitous—enabling better business and government and neighborhoods.

And imagine no longer taking three minutes to explain GIS to the unacquainted! (Frankly, I now find myself describing it as "geospatial analytics and intelligent mapping" to those unfamiliar.) If we lack a unified front in this regard, it can only weaken this objective. Acrimony can be infectious, spreading like a virus, serving only to break down the community continuity and unravel all the positive work and forward strides you all have made. It should not be a choice of "closed" or "open" taken in isolation. It's based on the best business model for you and your organization. The most appropriate tool provides fitness of purpose and ensures the greatest success for those consuming it, shining a bright light on the solution, the innovator, and the remarkable technology that enabled it to happen.

About the Author

Victoria Kouyoumjian joined Esri in 1995 and has been an eyewitness to changes, innovations, and tech challenges in IT and GIS. After several years as product manager for a suite of developer-focused software solutions, she now works as senior IT strategies architect and technology evangelist, dedicating research and attention to emerging technologies and trends, including the tech disrupters that may impact the geospatial community. She holds an MBA and bachelor's degrees in geography and English. Kouyoumjian coauthored *The Business Benefits of GIS: An ROI Approach*; often writes articles on cloud computing, open source, and emerging trends; and presents frequently on topics in high tech as burgeoning trends move into mainstream. You can follow her on Twitter (@Vkouyoumjian) or connect with her on LinkedIn.