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Tomorrow could be Cloudy...

This month I thought it might be appropriate to look at the latest IT industry 'buzz' centred on the Cloud initiatives and alternatives.

I wonder are we just going back to being dumb? Dumb terminals that is. Although this is not necessarily about GI the Cloud will influence GI and how we PAY for IT services whether software, data, delivery etc. It has been referred to a lot for the delivery of things such as Email, CRM etc.

So what is the Cloud? Glad you asked. For a start it is much more than traditional hosting where a company will take your web server, or web application, and host it on the internet for you.

The cloud has a few differentiators to traditional hosting:

- You are running on top of another company's 'platform'
- Your application will scale as required – you can 'turn it up to eleven' for a short time without buying new servers etc
- Pay per use – forget huge annual maintenance agreements and just pay for what you use
- Geographically replicated ensuring that if one Data Centre goes down others, around the globe, will automatically kick in and take up the slack.

With the cloud and SaaS (Software as a Service), you don't need dedicated servers with their inherent costs – and I'm talking total costs – hardware, software, bandwidth, staff, maintenance etc. Everything is provided for you and you pay for what you use – pretty much like a Utility such as electricity or gas.

The Cloud is definitely here. Twitter, for example, is run in the Cloud on the top of Amazon Web Services – a type of Cloud. Steve Ballmer, the boss of Microsoft, recently gave a presentation and proudly announced that they have bet the company on the Cloud – you will probably only be able to see it through Windows though. Even in our niche, GI vendors are coming to the party – ESRI are touting that they are now 'Cloud ready' (if you have a certain type of license), via ArcGIS Server on Amazon Web Services. PBBI (Pitney Bowes Business Insight / MapInfo) will have

an SaaS offer for all their solutions and heck even John Suffolk, the British government CIO is talking about the 'g-cloud' to help reduce the number of servers (and therefore cost, carbon footprint etc) that the government has to pay for. There will be public clouds, private clouds, shared clouds, clouds with pink dots – clouds in any variation you can think of.

The Desktop is dumb, it's dead

So now Google et al are telling us that we should get everything up into the Cloud so that we can all access information via the web – and I for one am totally behind it. However they have also been saying that there is no longer a need for the desktop but I don't believe it, especially in GI. I do believe that time when 'power users' needing expensive desktop software is coming to an end and I think ESRI have already worked this out. I can't remember the last time I saw any marketing for ArcGIS Desktop (think ArcInfo) – all marketing is now focussed on ArcGIS server now.

I read on a blog recently that what Google are now talking about is the Use and Visualisation of the data which is no longer dependent on the desktop because in the future it will be via the mobile/internet. Smartphone usage is increasing 30% year on year, and mobile web adoption is now eight times faster than the equivalent point ten years ago for the desktop. More than half of new internet connections are coming from mobile devices. Whilst not a lot of people are happy to acknowledge it we are experiencing a fundamental shift in the way we access information. Everything the likes of Google are doing will be 'mobile first' – think via iPhone, Google Android phones and devices etc.

Well now, Use and Visualisation are your cup of tea aren't they? Isn't that what GIS does? I think we'd all better get ready for this type of Use. I think any business whose websites are inaccessible to certain devices (i.e. are not mobile ready) will miss the boat

as people won't be able to visualise their information.

Getting ready for the web (again)

We're in 2010 and it is quite amazing to see how some old, closed, proprietary technologies which aren't really 'fit for purpose' are still being used. Take Flash for example – it is old and cumbersome and pretty much inaccessible on the web but it still drives some of the biggest sites around such as YouTube. However mobile device companies such as Apple refuse to support Flash on their devices preferring to opt for the modern HTML 5 alternative. This is the future and I know that Google, the owners of YouTube, are providing alternative 'beta' versions of their sites in the new HTML 5 standard which removes the need for Flash.

What has this Getting Web Ready and the Cloud got to do with anything?

If you are looking at putting anything up on the web in the near future put it on the web in an open manner so it can be discovered, used and visualised by the next generation of devices otherwise you'll be missing a trick. This sounds like good advice, but as with everything there are a few caveats. Licensing for example is very important you have to make sure you can get your data out once it is in if you want to change your cloud provider – we don't want to run into a data lock similar to the one we have been facing with some proprietary GIS systems do we?