

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

Google Streetview hits the UK

MAT GREENFIELD

The end of the Spring Term saw the start of Google Streetview in the UK, though the service has been widespread in the US for quite some time and has had minor development in the UK before now, the project just underwent a massive expansion and now covers 96% of British roads – and what are people doing with this amazing new technology? Finding their house of course!

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Throughout 2009, a fleet of 'Google'-adorned, 360-degree-camera-mounted cars have been scouring the country, taking images and interlacing this information with their already matured service Google Maps to create a drive-by view of the world.

The reason behind this massive undertaking is that SatNavs only show you a birds-eye view and bark tinny directions based on algorithms, which can sometimes be misleading due to inaccuracies in the devices information and satellites. Streetview allows you to look up your route beforehand and see precisely the area you're driving through and arriving at, allowing you to base your driving decisions on what you have seen and not simply what you can interpret from



your digital backseat (or in this case windscreen) driver.

Google encountered an unprecedented upsurge in traffic on the day of its launch as people flocked to use the new feature, although some reports suggest that a majority of these were simply to look up one's own home, workplace or town (guilty) rather than putting it to any navigational use. However, as the initial excitement of the service dies down, hopefully this will be put to genuine purpose as people are forced to stop blaming the Sat-Nav for them driving off a cliff or into walls.

Google have taken measures to ensure that people's faces and car's number plates have been blurred out, adhering to privacy laws, using

automated scanning techniques developed during the early months of Streetview's US unveiling.

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Nevertheless, things can still fall through the net and scaremongering reports about privacy-invasion are abundant in the British press as people decry the visibility of their face, number plate or the compromising position they found themselves in at last summer's barbecue

– Google knows what you did last summer.

Evidently, Google's supposedly "evil" reputation precedes them, as reports have emerged over the past twelve months of people chasing the Google cars out of neighbourhoods in the UK, Germany and Norway, where men in scuba gear and wielding pitchforks led a customary Viking welcome for Google's peering lenses. Not to mention the plethora of viral websites have sprung up showcasing the funniest, stupidest and weirdest things people have been snapped in by these roaming wastes-of-petrol, such as <http://www.streetviewfun.com/>.

Google knows what you did last summer.

The next stage of Google's masterplan is to add cycleways and pedestrian pathways to Streetview, having already deployed camera-mounted bikes ridden by dignity-forsaken employees who somewhat resemble rickshaws after a robot uprising. The logical next step to that is full-scale integration of the Streetview data with SatNavs and GPS devices (such as smartphones) to aid navigational algorithms by putting more data at its disposal to ensure it vocalises instructions that have had a full-range of checks done.

Look out for that tree!

Gizmodo leaks iPhone 4G - Apple respond

MAT GREENFIELD

In April, technology news blog 'Gizmodo' were contacted by a man who had found a prototype iPhone 4G that an Apple developer had left behind in a bar that evening, little did they know that their exclusive

news break would soon turn into a nightmare.

After posting pictures of the device from every possible angle, including taking it apart, owner Jason Chen was contacted by Apple requesting the device be returned to them, which Chen (wishing to

avoid legal recourse) was all too happy to oblige.

The device had been left by Apple developer and prototype tester Gray Powell in a bar where he had been discussing the iPhone with a fellow Apple fan, reportedly being careful not to let his companion get too close a look at the device which has been disguised to resemble an earlier iPhone model. When Powell left the bar, it is reported, the device was picked up by the unnamed person who, upon discovering what it was, contacted Gizmodo and sold them the device for, it is understood, \$5000.

This was not the end of the story, however, as Chen has since had his house searched and his computers seized by California's Police Department on suspicion of receiving stolen goods. The incident raises serious questions about the rights of 'bloggers' as journalists, though journalists have a series of legal loopholes that prevents prosecution for many things that they do in

their position, it is highly debatable whether or not bloggers are privy to the same rights, responsibilities or even if they can be considered journalists at all.

The incident raises serious questions about the rights of 'bloggers' as journalists

Besides the request for their device back, Apple have remained silent throughout this incident though anonymous sources within Apple have confirmed that the device leaked is the next generation iPhone due to be unveiled this summer. This new model includes a front-facing camera and a new casing that avoids the slippery curved edges of previous models.

Image courtesy of Gizmodo.com, used with permission.



In other news

Apple have announced the release date of the iPad in the UK after months of speculation and delays. The device will be released on 28 May and cost between around £429 and around £699 depending on version.

New research comparing the complete our genomes reveal that Humans share up to 4% of our DNA with our ancient relatives Neanderthals.

A group of the top 255 scientists have written an open letter defending science against attacks by 'special interests or dogma' with particular focus on climate science, as well as evolution and the Big Bang Theory, in the face of religious opposition.

On a related topic, further research indicates that the increasingly early start of summer over the past 50 years is, indeed, being caused by the effects of global warming.

Samsung have released the first commercially available 3D television, costing (at lowest spec) around £1,200 with an additional £80 for a pair of glasses alone.

HTC Hero Review - A Vision in Teflon

MAT GREENFIELD

History shows that over a greater number of versions, the more refined a product becomes – the first iPhone now looks more primitive than Wayne Rooney discovering fire, and not much has changed over two generations. HTC has become one of the most prolific mobile phone handset manufacturers in a fraction of the time. Their team-up with Google, as a platform for the web-giant's Android Operating System, has shot the “quietly brilliant” Taiwanese company into the realm of gadget infamy bringing out a new handset, it seems, every twelve seconds. From HTC's apparent strategy of throwing handset after handset at Apple to compete with the iPhone, a champion has emerged – the aptly named, HTC Hero. *Spark** been sent a model from the phone network 3 to review the phone and the Spotify, Skype and Windows Live Messenger apps.

The Hero itself is a teflon-coated masterpiece of construction, albeit one blemished by an unsightly and pocket-cumbersome chin

The Hero itself is a teflon-coated masterpiece of construction, albeit one blemished by the unsightly and pocket-cumbersome chin that HTC initially adopted as a staple design feature but appears, thankfully, to be undergoing a swift phasing out judging by more recent handsets like the HTC Desire. The casing is good to hold but it's kryptonite appears to be colour: models I've seen come in a choice of either a sexy dark blue/black or a dull cream like the puke-stained lino flooring in a particularly underwhelming nightclub. The latter colour tries so hard to play off Apple's “sterile white” motif on some models of Macbook that it's remarkable to turn this thing on and not be confronted with a stoic apple symbol. The review model came in this ghastly cream that will quickly start to grow murky and give the handset the colour of an old plaster.

The Jay Leno chin houses a standard trackball and a search and ‘back’ button for web browsing, the chrome portion below the screen flaunts the standard phone keys to navigate the Android OS. The top and bottom edges are for the ports, standard headphone jack atop and mini-USB port for charging beneath. Save a volume rocker, itself barely visible as it matches the casing colour, HTC have elected to keep the edges of the phone fairly bare, no doubt harkening to Apple's iPhone strategy of having only the bare minimum in ports and buttons. The back sports a rather good 5 megapixel camera that delivers a remarkable picture quality that far outstrips the Palm Pre. A crispy 320x480 screen with 16-bit colour

offers a passable display, but not one you'd want to watch a particularly high quality video on, the recessed screen creates a noticeable separation between touchscreen and viewscreen that was slightly off-putting to use when navigating it's capacitive touchscreen but not a significant problem.

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HTC have superimposed their own “Sense” User Interface over the Android OS, allowing features such as multiple customisable homescreens and multi-touch web browsing, to leave their own mark on the device. This additional UI includes a plethora of built-in widgets and gizmos to make personalising the fully customisable homescreen easy and reduce the need to wade through app stores on your first use of the phone; one of the best widgets is the Twitter widget that displays a real-time feed and allows you to tweet directly from the home-screen. Other widgets include a website bookmark slideshow, message displays and the ability to customise multiple home-screens for different purposes, such as having one set up for work purposes and another for day-to-day, toggling between them with a simple side-swipe. This is the first Android phone to support multi-touch, pre-installed through the tweaking that HTC provided in ‘Sense’ – however, it's far from the comfortable pinch-zoom you get on the iPhone or Palm Pre and can sometimes feel jittery and unresponsive. The onscreen keyboard is standard Android, which I feel is where ‘Sense’ has missed a trick, the keys are small and hard to manipulate properly and writing anything at length was a nightmare, even when tilted to landscape keyboard. As usual with Android, they've done what they can and heavily integrated text-prediction systems can turn even something as obscurely mis-typed as ‘wrotwra’ into ‘writers’ without needing to be prompted, though this can lead to some confusing moments when you try and enter a non-dictionary word or ‘text speak’ (particularly applicable when tweeting) as it persistently tries to correct you. The dictionary grows as you enter words so this problem will likely be phased out with time.

One of the best widgets is the Twitter widget that displays a real-time feed and allows you to tweet directly from the home-screen

Spotify mobile came out late last year as a subscription-based service, allowing music streaming across your data connection. The



app, which has been provided for the review model by 3, lets the user find and play songs, create/import playlists and save them directly to the phone (albeit in a DRM laden format that will only work within the phone itself). Perhaps the biggest criticism of the phone comes in here, it's sound quality can be tinny at times – it has two rear speakers with a larger one on the front of the phone for phone calls, but when, for example, music is playing the device and is placed on it's back the sound is severely muffled. This shouldn't be a problem for calls and can be resolved by placing the phone on it's side, though this is an awkward solution that you wouldn't use long term.

It's sound quality can be tinny at times

Songs on Spotify come in at a reasonable quality, when using headphones, the same as you would experience from a standard MP3 file, and will buffer and play astoundingly fast for it's standard 3G connection in the Reading area. As this is a premium service, the app comes sans-adverts that you hear on the free computer software and is available for around £10 per month. While you can upgrade to a higher bitrate package, also lacking the adverts, with a standard 3G connection streaming larger files may be more trouble than it's worth. The app is intuitively laid out, allowing you to switch between ‘Now Playing’ and search modes without interrupting the song or getting lost in a haze of settings; a five button lower menu allow you to move between all the commonly used features and an ever-present search button allows you to find a song faster than Nick Clegg's popularity fluctuates.

Skype is a nice, responsive app that integrates VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) into your phone so you can call other Skype users in the same way you would call someone's mobile, being so bold as to use Android's self-same display when making a Skype call as you see when making a phone call. It integrates all the same chat features as you get on the real thing and contacts are imported easily, as yet there's no clear feature to include video chat. I found told that the call quality was good, precisely what you'd get on a phone call. Overall, the Skype app is a nice touch but, I can't help feeling, ultimately unnecessary since to use the app you already have to be using a phone! Although when you factor in that most 3 contracts allow free use of this app, even without a data plan, it could still be quite a useful tool to have in your app arsenal. Windows Live Messenger app is another quite useful tool, laying out conversations in a manner strikingly similar to the SMS display on the iPhone, that's not a criticism, however, as it is extremely well organised and intuitive to use to keep up with your IMs.

This is the first Android phone to support multi-touch, pre-installed through the tweaking that HTC provided in ‘Sense’

Of the latest phones, HTC and Android are so ubiquitous they're becoming the phone equivalent of a screensaver and so the HTC Hero handset feels fairly standard, the operating system, on the other hand, is saved from repetitive drudgery by HTC's addition of the innovative ‘Sense’ UI which, though far

from perfect, has a lot of potential for HTC to drop their Google overlords in favour of their own refined OS (which, considering the release of Google's Nexus One phone, looks increasingly likely). If you're looking to unify your phone and MP3 player, I recommend the Spotify app, £10 per month for unlimited music (incidentally, if you're not on an unlimited data plan, avoid it like the plague) on a portable device is a great system, though I recommend using headphones to get the best sound quality. Skype is free so worth a go and WLM is fantastic if you're a heavy user.

Comfortable 8 out of 10. A perfectly usable phone saved from being boring by the ‘Sense’ UI

My overall rating – a comfortable 8 out of 10. A perfectly usable phone saved from being another unremarkable HTC/Android lovechild by the inception of the ‘Sense’ UI allowing customisation and a very fun user experience. The phone has some design issues, however, which have detrimental effects elsewhere, like in sound quality or the awkward feel the chin gives the otherwise very sturdy handset. The Hero is aptly named because it shows that the previously shy HTC are beginning to experiment on their own products and not be ruled over by Google – the HTC Hero isn't your cheap, flashy comic book superhero, but more the literary underdog hero being tightly controlled. I just hope that the HTC Hero's attempt to break away from Google won't turn it into the Tragic Hero.

Review model courtesy of 3MobileBuzz.