

What happened to Overlay Engines: A Story of Technological Shifts

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Abstract

At a certain point in the history of GIS, the polygon overlay tool was seen as the essential marker of a “real” GIS. Benchmarks were built around performance, and reputations made or lost on this criterion. In the current functionality of web mapping, there is next to no emphasis on such analytical tools. There are complex operations (such as shortest path) performed, often in blindingly fast real-time (on huge networks).

Overlay engines have become a minor issue, pursued by a few fanatics in computational geometry. Major software packages include radically improved geometrical processing, but do not provide any user interface to control the process. Important issues do not get taught, so the next generation may have little background in the technical subtleties.

This paper will be a reflection on how technological shifts not only influence performance, but they change expectations totally. The written paper will make connections to science and technology studies as a way to understand the interactions between technology and society.