British Library Georeferencer
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A word from BL Georeferencer Project: participation

I judged it all wrong to start with. Who would participate in crowdsourcing map rectification, even if those maps are emblems of spatial beauty, and why? It took making the British Library Georeferencer project happen to answer that.

To give some background: I had been looking at online tools for georeferencing scanned maps for the last couple of years, following previous projects and keeping an eye on the library's work crowdsourcing the creation of new collection items. A combination of these was ideal: acquiring the spatial metadata obtainable via georeferencing, while fostering a sense of personal involvement and engagement. With this in mind, Klokan Technologies' newly-enhanced Georeferencer tool was selected.

Maybe it was the incentives – lots of colorful visualisations of project progress, the personal recognition of one's name associated with the maps, the ranked "competition", or the immediate gratification of viewing the map overlaid on satellite imagery – that motivated participants. After meeting the top five contributors, who all visited the Library following the project, I got the sense that these features were vital to the quick success of that first lot. But it was also clear that working with the maps provided a new and exciting way to engage with the library's collections and introduced the historical landscape and all the imaginings that come from seeing alternate portrayals of the spaces we know.

Before the project release, I had (wrongly, it turns out) supposed that those most active would be map affectionados, but of my top participants only one claimed such! This was a group of educated, enthusiastic individuals with general interests. Georeferencer turned out to be a way to introduce the British Library and these collections to a new audience.

So why did folks contribute to our project? The incentives and elements of addictiveness in the process must be credited. Some participants were digital hounds: active users of social networking and all the whizzy tools that come with that, or regular patrons of crowdsourcing efforts as a way to contribute intellectually to worthwhile undertakings. But subtler reasons, such as what makes one browse books or window shop, were definitely in there.