

# Interview with Tyler Mitchell

The interview in this issue is with Tyler Mitchell. Tyler Mitchell served as the executive director for OSGeo for several years and offers a unique perspective on the organization. In this interview we talk with Tyler about his term as executive director and find out what he is working on as his career advances outside of the organization.



## **1) What were the key accomplishments of OSGeo during your term as executive director?**

Many will remember the earliest days of the MapServer Foundation. It was an exciting time to start passing around ideas. It was also a tremendous learning curve for me and the others involved early on. Surviving some of that learning back in 2005 was our first test. I am glad during that early period that we aimed for more than just MapServer and MapGuide related work. I remember during my first few months with OSGeo doggedly working alongside a few others over Christmas holidays to migrate systems to a new service provider. This makes me laugh, because during the last month of my term in 2011, I spent much time on

systems stuff again.

What happened between those two bookends is purely amazing. It wasn't something I will take credit for, but something I was happy to support where I could. We had the idea to work together across projects to help raise awareness of open source geospatial software. The projects were already running fine as separate entities, so many didn't see the need for this type of collaborative marketing. However, I saw that the collaborative marketing effort was an opportunity to help get OSGeo software onto more desks.

Once we started to brand OSGeo and raise the profile of the organization in various ways, the local chapters were keen to form and further support the efforts. Meeting others on-the-ground in your own locale is of paramount

importance for many users. Again, I was just one of many trying to encourage this growth of the organization.

Another key accomplishment is the several successful FOSS4G events. These events are a feather in our cap. No matter how you measure the success of these events (financial success, number of attendees, quality of speakers) it has been going very well. Not perfect of course, but more than most of us could have imagined. I was glad that part of my job at OSGeo was to be involved in these events. It allowed me to see all the work that goes on behinds the scenes with local organizers. This was a tremendous accomplishment.

With both the local chapters and the FOSS4G event we've raised OSGeo software profiles to a much higher point. One related accomplishment is also around the bridges to proprietary vendors that has been made. OSGeo sponsors have had strong showing and a lot of work has been done to find common ways to work together and support all who come into the OSGeo ecosystem. Maintaining those good relationships is not always easy but was very satisfying to see.

## **2) As the executive director of OSGeo, how did you personally define the mission of OSGeo as an organization?**

It has always been simple to me: raise the profile of OSGeo projects.

You need to keep hands off the projects themselves, as they run fine with or without OSGeo. Raising awareness of the projects is important because the more users you get, the more potential testers you have, which increases your odds of having more developers and more proponents in high places. To get that initial increase in users we focused on various marketing approaches. Some of these marketing approaches were aimed at "traditional" GIS users. Others were aimed at new approaches to managing geodata. Yet others were aimed to build academic communities around the world.

Of course, this doesn't mean ignoring needs of developers or the projects. Instead, it reflects on the goal of bringing them and their work into the spotlight. Naturally this brings forward more opportunities to attract funding for more development, which is still a new idea for some of the projects.

### **3) What are the biggest challenges for OSGeo moving forward?**

There are so many opportunities. I think the challenge is picking the top opportunities and pursuing them with enough force to make a difference. Coming up with feasible ways to engage the four key target areas I have been looking at is an important challenge to consider. These key target areas are: business, government, non-governmental organizations, and academia. I'd also like to see OSGeo working closer with OGC in some capacity. I'm not an expert in any one of these particular areas. To define the best approach in these areas, serious time and brainstorming from the broader community is needed.

### **4) What excites you personally about open source software or technology in general as you move into the future?**

I'm as enthusiastic for open source geospatial solutions as ever. My initial interest in open source GIS was spurred on when I was looking for ways to build my own professional toolkit. I wanted a toolkit I could learn at home. A toolkit I could bring to work and invest my personal time in. It's the same today, though my sights are set a bit higher.

Now I want to help build system-level toolkits that can help meet the needs of those target areas I mentioned. I've moved from thinking about the individual who needs some tool for a job, to the perspective in which I think about organizations that need platforms for solutions. Platforms they can rely on into the future. I argue that open source is still a large part of that need.

### **5) What do you plan to do next in your career?**

There are two things on my plate. The most important is my work with Actian (<http://www.actian.com/>) overseeing the geospatial implementation into their Ingres database products. (Actian was formerly Ingres.) It's exciting for me because they have real customers with 24/7 needs. These customers also have real challenges. This is a good fit because I enjoy keeping things practical. If there isn't a practical reason for spending time on something, then I quickly lose interest. I'm also glad to be working at a slightly more technical level. Research and development is also an important part of who I am, so this is helping scratch an itch that had been on the shelf while doing outreach at the OSGeo.

The other project I'm really excited

about is my startup of a niche publishing company LocatePress (<http://locatepress.com>). LocatePress was going to be a rainy day project, but since my work with OSGeo ended, I had to get moving on it a bit faster than I had originally planned. I hear almost universal agreement that the OSGeo sphere needs more training materials. With the success of my book, *Web Mapping Illustrated*, and other similar books, I decided to focus on getting quality material into print. There is nothing like a financial incentive to help motivate would-be writers to help share knowledge about their favorite OSGeo projects. While "niche" may be a swearword in publishing, it is actually our strength here. Geospatial technology may be a side category for many publishers, but for us it is everything. Its been great to work with Gary Sherman to get his latest book, *The Geospatial Desktop*, into print. I look forward to working with others who have great book ideas. Bring me your book ideas Landon!

**6) Will you remain involved in OSGeo activities? If you will remain involved, on what will your activities at the OSGeo now focus?**

I think there will be some natural overlap, just as there has been for

many volunteers over the past 6 years. Finding that overlap will take some time. I'm still very interested in the success of the OSGeo Journal. The Journal is serving a particular need (especially for academics desiring peer review) and the publication can still grow. I will also be interested in helping make various types of events happen, as keeping in touch with the broader community is important for me both personally and professionally. I expect to find lots of excuses for continuing to work with those who I've enjoyed working with while at OSGeo. Individuals shouldn't hesitate to contact me with questions and ideas. ([tyler.mitchell@actian.com](mailto:tyler.mitchell@actian.com)) It's going to be another interesting decade for sure!

Thanks so much for the opportunity to share my thoughts.

**Tyler**