THE ATLAS OF CANADA AFTER 100 YEARS – USER-CENTRED DEVELOPMENT AND EVOLUTION

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The 6th edition of The Atlas of Canada was launched in August 1999 at the 19th ICA Conference in Ottawa, Canada. In 2006 it will be celebrating its 100th anniversary as Canada's premier atlas resource. The on-line Atlas contains over 1400 maps from all editions since 1906, offering an unparalleled view of Canada, its people, environment, economy and history. It is a freely available, completely Internet-based interactive atlas that uses the most current on-line interactive mapping software and technologies. The main objective of The Atlas of Canada is to disseminate popularized but authoritative scientific information about the geography of Canada from a national perspective. Using interactive maps, text, multimedia aids and ancillary documents, users are provided with geographic information about issues and themes of interest.

This paper will look at the Atlas' user-centred development approach in dealing with the many dynamic changes in design, structure and technology in its on-line mapping environment. A considerable amount of quantitative and qualitative research has been conducted to guide the Atlas. The results have allowed it to become a more user-friendly and accessible product. Specific examples will be presented showing the evolution of its thematic mapping user interface, integration and visualization of topographic data and its offering of 100 years, through five previous editions, of traditional mapping in an online product. The Atlas serves a broad general public and educational audience in a large and very diverse country. These user groups responded poorly to earlier GIS-centric mapping environments. As an example, user interface tools that are second nature to those in the GIS domain are virtually unknown and less usable to the Atlas of Canada's user groups. Putting a new face on these tools and in some cases developing something entirely new was necessary. Ingenuity, working with users and exploring alternate avenues have allowed The Atlas of Canada to become a world leader in not only National Atlases but in developing effective and usable on-line mapping product.