What Did What3Words Do Wrong?

I stated that, after some research, I decided not to integrate the What3Words words-to-coordinates service into my application. In this document, I will summarise the reasons why. Though, this is not an exhaustive list.

The Reasons Why

- In 2021, What3Words sent a takedown notice to a set of researchers who had reverse-engineered the service, and were offering a free, open-source alternative called "WhatFreeWords". The notice sent to these researchers implied that a copyright violation had taken place, despite the researchers not having access to the source code, (due to W3W making none of its source code public,) and thus physically not being able to "replicate" it. It even, at one point, implies that W3W holds copyright over a list of words, and that WhatFreeWords is somehow a pirated version of What3Words[1].

    - Even if the takedown notice wasn't as laughable as it is, W3W's blatant opposition to open-source software makes the service unsuitable for use in a project that is supposed to be very pro-open-source.

- One of its main advertising points is its usefulness for the emergency services, however, this fact has been brought under scrutiny by researchers[2] and rescuers[3] alike - as there are far better ways of locating individuals who have a phone signal, (such as just tracing the phone call,) and words themselves are just not good identifiers due to them being very easy to mishear over the phone.

    - Specifically concerning the issue of words being easy to mishear over the phone, there are also a lot of W3W addresses with incredibly similar sets of words[4] (sometimes with the only difference being that one of the three words in a set is plural where it is singular in another) and their word list itself contains multiple instances of similar-sounding words[2].

- OpenStreetMap itself does not approve of the use of W3W.[5]

    - It would be disrespectful of me to rely on OSM so heavily for this project, and then to go and do something with this project (and their data) that they would advise against.

Sources

1. J. A. Kemp (2019).What3Words vs. Aaron Toponce. [E-commerce Takedown Notice] Available online at: <https://ivan.sanchezortega.es/w3w-bullying/2019-09-19/SCIP%20-%20Ecommerce%20Takedown%20Notice%20-%20W3W%2019%20Sept%202019.pdf> [Accessed 15th February, 2023].

2. Cybergibbons (2021). "Why What3Words is not suitable for safety critical applications". [Blog] Available online at: <https://cybergibbons.com/security-2/why-what3words-is-not-suitable-for-safety-critical-applications/> [Accessed 15th February, 2023].

3. Corey Bullock (2021). "BC Search and Rescue groups warning against use of What3Words app". [Article] Available online at: <https://www.summerlandreview.com/news/bc-search-and-rescue-groups-warning-against-use-of-what3words-app/> [Accessed 15th February, 2023].

4. Alex Bloor (2021). [Twitter] 27th of April. Available online at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20220705072644/https://twitter.com/alexbloor/status/1383457642438283272> [Accessed 15th February, 2023].

5. OpenStreetMap (2016). what3words. [Online] Available online at: <https://wiki.openstreetmap.org/wiki/What3words> [Accessed 15th February, 2023].