SUPERVISOR/S: Sally Jo Cunningham and Christopher Jones
PROJECT TITLE: People’s Place Names
FIELD: Computer Science, Geography
DIVISION/SCHOOL: HECS - School of Computing and Mathematical Sciences
PROJECT LOCATION: Hamilton

PROJECT ABSTRACT:
People’s Place Names (https://www.yourplacenames.com/vernacular/), developed by Professor Christopher Jones (Cardiff University) in collaboration with Ordnance Survey UK, is a platform supporting the UK public in tagging locations in the UK with their informal (‘vernacular’) names, that is, the place names used colloquially but not necessarily acknowledged by official / administrative geographic information systems or representations. This project will involve porting the system for use in New Zealand and improving the interface to support better usability. I am attempting to interest collaborators within Waikato University with expertise in social geography and oral history, with an eye to tailoring the existing design to better support research in those areas.

Vernacular place names are interesting both technically (to improve interfaces incorporating geographic details; for example, to allow a user to search for locations near “Five cross-roads” in Hamilton), and culturally (to better understand historic development of a location, local perceptions of geographic extent of social boundaries, etc.). This system would be the first to support the capture of these informal place names within New Zealand.

This project will involve two phases:
• Porting the existing code to function on New Zealand online maps. Professor Christopher Jones (Cardiff University), who designed the existing system, will co-supervise the porting of the code.
• Modifying the user interface to make the system more usable and appealing for New Zealanders to interact with it. While the UK version of People’s Place Names was technically sound, its interface was better suited to geographic specialists than the general public. We will re-focus the interface to the general public and investigate “social engineering” techniques to encourage its use.

STUDENT SKILLS:
• Web programming skills
• Familiarity with APIs (particularly Google)

PROJECT TASKS:
• Weeks 1 - 3: Explore the current UK implementation, working with Prof Chris Jones, to understand how the code must be modified to port it
• Weeks 4 - 5: Explore the Google Maps API to support the port
• Weeks 6 - 9: Implement and test the port of the UK system to New Zealand, with Google Maps as the target map
• Optional, if the above are completed more quickly and expected: Trial straightforward modifications of the NZ system interface, based on user research to be conducted in parallel by Prof Jones and myself
• Week 10: Create research poster

EXPECTED OUTCOMES:
• Student’s Research Poster (as per clause 6 of the Scholarship regulations)
• Conference or journal article describing the system and its implementation
• Implemented system to use for further development and experimentation
• We plan to continue this collaborative research and to publish further papers based, for example, on research into how to make this type of system more usable, how to tailor the system to better support oral historians, how to tailor the system to better