

AUGMENTING TRAVEL GOSSIP: DESIGN FOR MOBILE COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

New communication technologies are changing the way travellers gossip and trade advice while on the road. This paper presents initial results from our studies of backpacker culture and identifies gaps where future technologies could assist backpackers in existing situations. Our research included contextual interviews with backpackers, tours of hostel accommodation, and reviews of online discussion and blogging sites. Results so far indicate the need for mobile devices which can help a social, distributed community to connect and coordinate. To address this, we have developed methods of depicting community interaction and context of use, and prototype mobile travel assistants.

KEYWORDS: *social networks, mobility, peer-to-peer, cooperation, storytelling, tourism*

1. INTRODUCTION

Budget travellers have long traded stories with others they meet in campgrounds, hostels, busses and tourist trips. Communication technologies such as travel web logs (blogs), online photo albums, group e-mails and SMS are now enabling such story telling and gossip to flow through new channels and increasing levels of group awareness. We have conducted several ethnographic studies investigating backpacker culture, which look for opportunities for the introduction of new technologies. The studies examine travel habits and usage of discussion forums, paper message boards and travel blogs. Results indicate that a mobile travel assistant simplifying backpacker communication and coordination would enhance the quality of travel experiences.

2. A LIFESTYLE OF DISCOUNT TRAVEL

Backpackers have been described as “travellers who exhibit a preference for budget accommodation; an emphasis on meeting other people (locals and travellers); an independently organized and flexible travel schedule; longer rather than brief holidays; and an emphasis on informal and participatory recreation activities.” (Loker-Murphy & Pearce, 1995). Queensland Tourism estimates backpackers represent 10% of all visitors to Australia and that this is increasing (*Market insights tourism facts June 2004 - Backpacker Market*, 2004). Backpacking may be part of a larger trend towards “restless mobility” of societies (Richards & Wilson, 2004). Consequently issues affecting backpackers now may shortly become issues for larger portions of society.

Backpackers are part of the larger tourism market which includes package tourists, food & wine tours, holiday visitors, and business tourists. A number of research projects have developed technologies to assist different kinds of travellers. Examples include Urban Pilot which provides new ways to perceive the city (Goel, 2002); an operational mobile tourist guide utilizing location sensing called LoL@ (Pospischil, Umlauf, & Michlmayr, 2002); and applications to support museum visitors (Petrelli, Not, Zancanaro, Strapparava, & Stock, 2001). Other researchers have examined existing travel behaviour to guide future technology design (Brown & Chalmers, 2003). Brown & Chalmers used participant observation,

shadowing, interviews, and observations of a tourist centre to provide design guidelines and identify constraints for mobile guide design. Sociologists have also studied backpacking. One Australian study discusses duration of travel, lifestyle, goals and movement patterns (Loker-Murphy & Pearce, 1995) and a recent book discusses international differences and backpacker culture (Richards & Wilson, 2004).

With a wide variety of location sensors, wireless networking and mobile device solutions available, this project has focused on understanding the complexities of travellers' behaviour before developing designs to support it. We have used a combination of ethnographic methods including contextual interviews, hostel observations, analysis of travel discussion forums and travel blogs to help understand backpacker culture and look for gaps where technologies could be introduced.

3. METHOD

Contextual interviews with 24 backpackers (some of whom travelled in pairs) were held at two hostels in Brisbane, Australia. Interviews were semi-structured and held in public areas in the hostels. Backpackers were invited to discuss the backpacker community, communication patterns, travelling habits, travel gear and recording and sharing of travel experiences.

Tours of five hostels were conducted and recorded with photographs. Message boards postings in the hostels were reviewed for common themes and purposes. Additionally, five forums discussing backpacker tourism from an online discussion site were reviewed, which encompassed 1926 messages and 183 topic titles (www.tribe.net). Topic titles were grouped into one or more categories and themes were identified.

Several traditional blogs used to document travel were reviewed, as well as the online travel diaries from 373 backpackers (www.getjealous.com). 4238 photos documenting travel experiences have been reviewed and preliminary observations made regarding usage situations and content. As a proof of concept, the diaries of two backpackers have been used to develop social network diagrams showing the growth or withering of social ties by backpackers as they move.

4. BACKPACKER CULTURE

Backpackers reported a sense of community that revolved around smaller groups of people, sometimes described as "family away from home." Some types of backpackers move quickly, rarely staying with the same people long; others stay for a week or longer and build stronger ties with a group of regulars. Some hostels cater to longer-term backpackers who fall into the category of itinerant workers, while others are a place to sleep between bus journeys. Hostels are rarely connected unless they have the same owner, and backpackers usually have little awareness of other travellers staying at different hostels.

The questions "Where are you coming from?", "Where are you going to?", "Where are you originally from?" are common conversational openings. One reason given for travelling in groups is the ability to move beyond repetitions of introductory, superficial conversations. Pauses in movement or moving together allows for development of shared history and facilitates more complex conversations. A recent study showed 42% of backpackers in Australia travel alone (Ballen & Slaughter, 2004), indicating many backpackers may miss opportunities to build strong social ties while travelling.

Backpacker networks are often ad-hoc and short-term. Groups meet by coincidence for communal activities such as tours or hostel activities. Information and advice are swapped, and the individuals involved commonly leave within days to spread that information to others. Credibility of information is evaluated on the spot based on experience, but backpackers tend to be quite trusting of each other.

E-mail is a common medium for backpacker communication. It is ubiquitous and easily accessible, although at some cost, and usually with a time delay before receipt. Group e-mails are commonly sent by extroverted backpackers who act as social hubs in the network, sending out travel updates to large groups they have met. Voice communications via mobile phones and calling cards are used to a lesser degree, and primarily with friends and family at home. SMS is used to chat with those at home, and travellers they have met or are currently spending time with. Photos are commonly shared via camera LCD screens or web sites and stored on CDs, memory cards, or Media Players. Blogging travel stories is increasingly common as a way of sharing experiences and maintaining awareness amongst distributed social networks.

5. DISCUSSION FORUMS

The five most common categories were: general questions about destinations (30%), a miscellaneous category covering random and unclear topics (15%), general travel advice and stories (9%), equipment advice (8%) and accommodation (6%). Additional themes included: desire to travel with others, questions about methods of travelling, and offers to buy or sell gear. The location of backpackers when they posted was not available; however, many users were discussing past travel experiences or planning to travel. This confirms other findings that both pre and post-visit discussion of travel experiences are important (Brown & Chalmers, 2003). Current online discussion forums don't seem to be well known amongst backpackers on the road, and may not provide feedback rapidly enough to be used while mobile.

6. MESSAGE BOARDS IN HOSTELS

Paper-based message boards are commonly found in or outside hostels. They have a natural archaeological tendency to bury older, non-relevant items. Postings easily fall into the categories of being posted 1) by backpackers or 2) by others seeking to communicate with them. Postings from locals is usually advertising for pubs and tourist activities, or employment opportunities for nursing, telemarketing labouring, and hospitality. Hostels sometimes post information about transit services or low-cost events. Backpacker postings primarily concern: selling older cars or travelling gear, offers to share houses and transport, and people looking for items. Some cross-posting between hostels occurs, but postings by backpackers tend to be between people staying at the hostel where the board resides.

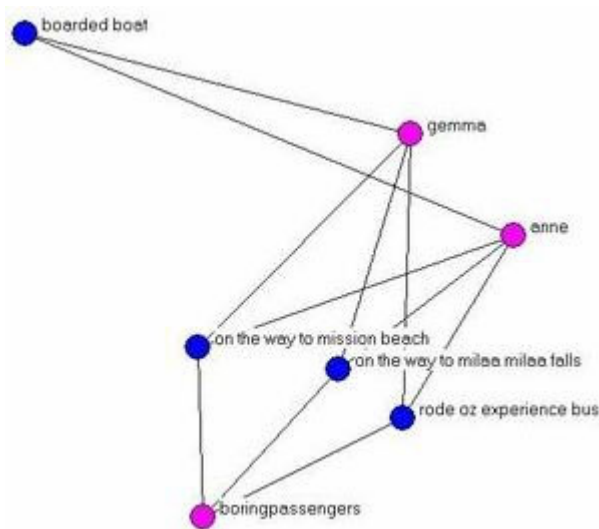


Figure 1: A graph showing backpackers meeting others via shared activities while moving.



Figure 2: A mock-up of a handheld travel assistant showing situational alerts and community authoring.

7. TRAVEL BLOGGING & ELECTRONIC DIARIES

Some backpackers who are familiar with web technologies run their own blogs and update them from the road. More commonly, sites which centralize travel blogs with more usable interfaces are used. These provide additional tools such as cross-linking between diaries and maps to visualize journeys (e.g. www.getjealous.com). Most backpackers are capable of using these sites from internet cafes while travelling. The blogs serve as a method of simultaneously updating other travellers met on the road, refreshing social ties, reducing stress levels of family at home and maintaining group awareness.

Photo analysis is still in a preliminary stage, however there is clearly an emphasis on taking pictures of people. This is likely to be part of "proving you got there", a way to record people met, and a way to offer them gifts of photos taken. The photos demonstrate travel through diverse environments that are

challenging for electronics. Sand, water, mud, motorcycles, glaciers, and deserts were photographed using digital cameras, and consequently would be the usage environment for other portable electronics as well.

Travel diaries provide detailed accounts of dates, locations, social use of space and problems experienced while moving. Animated social network diagrams have been constructed that show social network structure, growth and withering of social ties, and connections between people and travel activities (see Figure 1). It is feasible that group movement patterns, missed opportunities for information exchange and social hubs can be determined and visualized, after multiple sources have been combined. We have also developed physical context tables which show multiple levels of changing environment over time.

8. SUMMARY: DESIGNING A BACKPACKER ASSISTANT

We have conducted a series of ethnographic and participatory investigations into backpacker culture. Our results indicate that backpackers operate in social, ad-hoc, travelling groups which tend to lack an effective communication medium to support material and informational exchange. Backpackers currently practice community authoring in oral form through storytelling, giving advice, and display. Their networking can often be described as both offline and peer-to-peer. We are therefore primarily exploring decentralized structures for candidate technological approaches to support backpacker networking. Our studies further suggest the need to share negative as well as positive feedback about experiences in an uncensored format. We have also observed the social nature of backpacker culture and intend to promote face to face interaction with our designs. In our current work we are developing and evaluating device prototypes (see example in Figure 2) using ethnographic and participatory methods. These studies include team research “field trips” with device prototypes and social pairing activities in hostels.

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10. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work is supported by ACID (the Australasian CRC for Interaction Design) established and supported under the Australian Government's Cooperative Research Centres Programme. Also thanks to GetJealous.com, Tribe.net, anonymous travel bloggers and UQO for mobile device photos.