

Location, Location, Location

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Having written an article recently based on the phenomenon of interactive websites known to some as Web 2.0 after the conference of the same name, I was amused to discover that there is now also a conference called Where 2.0. This year's event was held at the end of May in San Jose California (where else) and according to their web site, brought together organisations as diverse as the Norwegian armed services and Walt Disney, not to mention car companies, telecoms, and most of the big names of the IT / ecommerce world.

Location, it would seem is becoming big business and not just for estate agents and day time TV shows. There is a convergence of technologies and prior investment which is generating a whole new class of applications based on where: Where are you and what could you be sold there; Where is the nearest party; Where did you go for a run; Where was that photo taken; Where were you at the time of the crime...

The components that come together for 'Where 2.0' are the ubiquitous mobile phone which has always had a pretty shrewd idea of where it's at. GPS devices which are getting ever smaller and cheaper to the point where they are being built into phones and other devices as well as creating new niche markets of their own. On line mapping systems such as Google earth or Microsoft's Spaceland 3D mapping tool. And of course any number of quirky new Web 2.0 style start up operations any one of which has the potential to be the next 'MySpace' or 'Utube'; but probably won't so please don't take this as investment advice...

Loopt, a California based start up company (www.loopt.com), has launched a service which uses location information derived from mobile phones to take the concept of social networking back out of cyberspace and onto the street. Once installed on your mobile phone, the Loopt software will let you locate similarly equipped friends on a map, alert you when friends are nearby and greatly aid the organisation of any number of impromptu parties and more intimate liaisons no doubt! It may sound far fetched but believe me this is coming to a teenage clique near you sooner than you think...

The GPS manufacturers are getting in on the act too, producing ever more specialised niche versions of the original location sensitive device. Companies like Garmin have already benefited hugely from the popularity of the quintessentially Web 2.0 craze for Geocaching – a sort of global treasure hunt game in which anyone can set up a ‘cache’ or treasure and then publish a set of clues to its location on a ‘geocaching’ web site. Anyone who follows the clues (usually based on GPS coordinates) and finds the cache can take an item of treasure and replace it with something of their own. The website (www.geocaching.com) currently lists over 110 different caches in the Isle of Man alone. Another niche for GPS units is for outdoor sports and fitness training. A GPS can be combined with a heart rate monitor to provide the committed jogger with a complete record of their suffering and once they get their breath back they can even download the details of their run and overlay them on a map to the delight of all of their friends and family!

Another well trodden path in the road to innovation is the eternal arms race between criminals and the law. Often seen as an ideal tool for criminals, mobile phones and the positional information they both emit and store have to quote a recent New Scientist article “become incredibly significant in the field of law enforcement.” The data held on a phone can be pretty durable and can even survive on phones recovered after spending many months at the bottom of a lake. In London the ambulance service occasionally relies on positional information from mobiles to locate callers whilst in the US phones must make this information available to emergency call centres by law.

And speaking of well trodden paths, I was particularly impressed with the tracking system used for this years Parish Walk which like the new TT timing system provided real time data on the speed and race position of all participants as they passed specific stages on the circuit to a web site. For dedicated Parish Walk support crews this provided much needed extra time with those all important cups of tea in front of the telly. TT supporters worldwide could ‘tune into’ the web site to get a real feel for the progress of the race as it happened (company firewall permitting).

Inevitably however it is the advertising industry, or perhaps I should say the business of advertising, which is likely to provide the financial basis for many of the more innovative applications of location tracking. To quote the Where 2.0 web site “Local search and advertising is driving this new wave of innovation, but the models aren’t set yet”. More generally, despite massive investment from the likes of Google, Yahoo and Amazon in mapping and 3d visualisation systems on the net, real world applications are being held back to some extent. There is a welcome awareness that the consumer is unlikely to take kindly to an avalanche of geo-spam appearing on their mobile phone. The information is out there, most of us carry a location tracking device around with us already, but who should be allowed to know where we are? Ultimately we can only hope that we will be the ones to control the value of our current location.