

“Get Lost, GetLostBot!” Annoying People by Offering Recommendations When They are Not Wanted

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ABSTRACT

This brief paper outlines the experience of releasing a purposefully contrary recommendation service for Foursquare called GetLostBot.

GetLostBot works differently than most recommender systems since it is responsive to behaviours rather than user requests. The system automatically monitors Foursquare behaviour and intervenes with suggestions when users fall into a routine. These interventions take the form of mysterious walking directions that challenge the user to visit somewhere new. Importantly, these suggestions are explicitly not informed by traditional metrics such as popularity, high ratings, or friend activity, and instead act as prompts to explore unknown places.

This paper discusses the reception to the application, highlighting the apparent disconnect between users’ good intentions around becoming more serendipitous, and the reality of those interventions as they are experienced in the wild.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

H.1.2 [Information Systems]: Human Factors

General Terms

Human Factors

Keywords

Serendipity, recommendations, intervention

1. INTRODUCTION

Foursquare is a popular social location-based service that allows users to “check-in” to venues and events. Through connections to friends, users follow one another’s activity and compete for points and badges.

As the service is centred on an individual’s locative experiences, Foursquare has expanded towards supporting discovery as a key feature. Through its “Explore” function [1], users can receive customised recommendations based on themes, reviews from other Foursquare users and friend activity.

This recommendation feature - although new - is founded on tried and tested principles of recommender services. At the centre of this is the assumption that a recommendation should be something that provides intrinsic value to the user. This is determined through an algorithmic understanding of places that the user has been before, and the behaviour of users who show similar patterns (including friends). This kind of system can be considered successful if the user does in fact find value in the locations given as recommendations.

There has recently been concern about the impact of recommender systems in terms of the breadth of choice they supply to users. The core of this argument is that by only recommending items based on mathematically determined similarity, the algorithms remove opportunities for serendipity, exploration and discovery. Hence by their very design, recommender systems restrict user freedom by reinforcing preferences for popular, safe and unadventurous choices in front of more risky outliers.

The literature characterises this problem as the “diversity-accuracy” dilemma [3] since highly accurate results tend to be limited to the most popular items. For example, everyone likes the Beatles, so a music recommendation for the Beatles is probably accurate yet not interesting.

2. GETLOSTBOT

This dilemma led me to create an application called GetLostBot, which challenges the presumption that recommendations should be accurate or indeed valuable. Instead, the focus of the service is on making *interventions*, and it attempts to move the value in the recommendation away from the subject, and into the intervention itself. This is characterised by a simple question:

“You have been here before. Why not have an adventure?”

GetLostBot works through longitudinal monitoring of user check-ins, and by issuing challenges when a predictable routine is detected. These challenges take the form of maps supplemented with mysterious walking directions to a nearby but undisclosed location, sent via email or Twitter. Importantly, the challenges are rare - once the user has signed up with the service, they will only receive a challenge when they have fallen into a routine, which could be days or months later.

Where Foursquare recommendations are based around finding places the user will probably like but have never been, GetLostBot takes the opposite approach in suggesting venues similar to those where the user has checked-in, but may never have considered visiting. For example, when checking into a bar, GetLostBot will always suggest another bar, however not one based on similarity. GetLostBot also ignores check-ins to travel or work-oriented venues (train stations, offices, etc.) to avoid making uninteresting or less useful challenges (e.g. to visit a random office building when checking into a workplace). When choosing destinations, it purposefully ignores ratings and reviews in order to expose places that are not well known by the user’s social group or Foursquare community. In this way, challenges are imbued with a serendipitous and explorative aspect that is not present in the “safe” recommendations from Foursquare itself

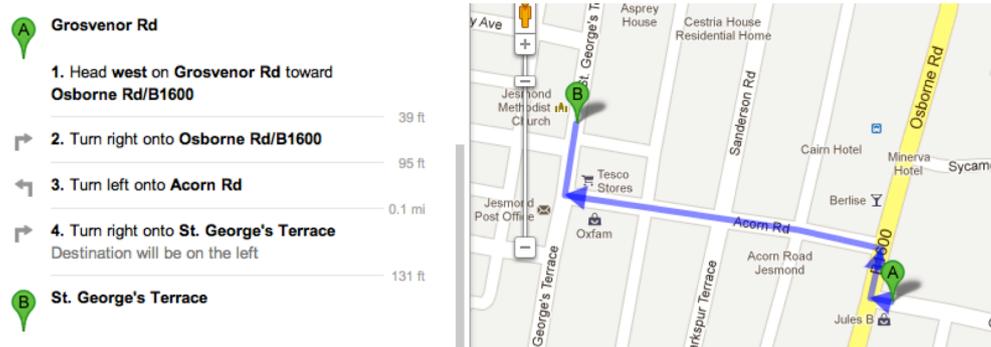


Figure 1 - Example of a challenge issued to a real user

The GetLostBot prototype was created with the support of sponsorship from Honda and The Guardian, as part of the “Honda Dream Factory” programme [2]. It was opened to the public shortly after the “Power of Minds” event in November 2011, and advertised via social media and on The Guardian website. Within a 5-week evaluation period, 137 distinct Foursquare users registered for the service.

After the five week evaluation, ending early January 2012, a formative evaluation of the system gathered feedback from the active user-base through a short online survey, which when combined with data from the service logs, illuminates attitudes to the application as a concept.

3. RESPONSE

Over the initial trial, 882 challenges were issued to users through Twitter and email. Of these, just 17 were “completed” by the user checking-in to the location determined by the application. This low engagement may be expected due to the way destinations are purposefully concealed. In the survey, only 3 out of 10 challenged users reported attempting to complete challenges. Asked about this, users seemed intimidated by the uncertainty. R8 says “I have no idea where it's sending me, I need a clue” and R16 says “there is a big barrier between reading the challenge (which is fun) and actually physically going”. However, many users reported that this was part of the charm – “the challenges are uncannily interesting” (R18).

The majority of respondents responded positively to the concept itself, and many reported that even just receiving the challenges served a purpose in terms of a gentle reminder to explore more. “it made me see just how often I was going to the same places” (R10). “it was good to change my route” (R16). “It does remind me how set in my ways I am” (R2). This reinforces the value of the application in terms of intervention.

Overall, the respondents to the questionnaire were positive, but the @GetLostBot twitter account itself has been the recipient of some spontaneous feedback on the quality of its suggestions:

“I live here! Get lost, Get Lost Bot! lol”

“silly robot - send me to a) a party, b) booze or c) women”

4. DISCUSSION

GetLostBot represents a reaction to the increasing ubiquity of recommendation services. While these services do have positive intent, the aggregate effect may in fact be negative in terms of serendipity, adventure and excitement.

Rather than wait for the user to decide when they need recommendations, GetLostBot offers them without prompt, when it feels the user has fallen into a routine.

This intervention is purposefully contrary and mysterious. The location itself explicitly ignores “safe”, highly rated (i.e. *boring*) places, and is presented as an unmarked walking map. This map performatively acts as an invitation to find metaphorical hidden pirate treasure, appealing to playful and serendipitous natures.

The very point of this intervention acting as an invitation to serendipity is where the value of GetLostBot lies – not in showing people places they are algorithmically likely to enjoy, but reminding the user of the pleasure to be found in ignoring the suggestions of faceless, humourless machines.

Users have engaged with this aspect – it is very easy to sell someone on the idea of being spontaneous and exciting, and indeed hundreds of people have pressed the button that engages it.

In practice, and upon reflection, most users see the value in the interventions once they get them, however there are regular complaints that it “spams” them, or that they don’t like the suggestions. I have a crude sense of humour so it does amuse me when it annoys people. We are so used to software behaving in an obsequious manner (some stooping to call themselves “services”), there is glee in making an application that breaks that expectation through unapologetic nagging about the user’s boring life choices.

5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly, thanks to the hundreds of users who have been interrupted and annoyed by GetLostBot. Maybe if their lives were more exciting it wouldn’t annoy them so much :)

Thanks also to Honda and Amplify for sponsoring the development of the application, and readers of The Guardian for voting for the application as part of the Dream Factory event.

6. REFERENCES

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