

The You Portal:

Mobile Digital Social Networks

Mark D. Pesce
Lecturer in Interactive Media
Australian Film Television and Radio School
markp@aftrs.edu.au

for Susan Mainzer

Mobile Journeys
3 February 2005

We have wholly entered the networked era; this day is proof of that. We're not talking about what to do when the network arrives; we're talking about what to do with it now that it's here. I have my own ideas about what a pervasive and continuously available network can be used for, and I want to spend the next few minutes sharing these thoughts with you.

First a note of confession; I am a recent convertee to the Religion of the Mobile. I came to it late because I am an American, and Americans think phones are only good for talking. I am embarrassed to say that I shared in this common blindness of my people. But when I came to Australia, the scales fell from my eyes. I have seen the light.

The mobile is so amazingly useful because it is with us everywhere we go. It's been thoroughly incorporated into our lifestyles; we organize our lives around it, and because of it. It is the telepathic portal, the one which keeps us in constant and pervasive mind-meld with all of the people in our world. But we're only at the very beginning of the mobile revolution; watching the first halting steps along a path which will profoundly reshape human communication.

Over the last year and a half, as I've been lecturing at AFTRS and making an intense study of the Australian and global media industries, some striking trends have become visible to me. Some of you may have heard that I've predicted the death of television broadcasting, because of the combination of broadband and peer-to-peer file sharing. But that's less than half the story. I'm working right now to get the whole story out,

in a book I'm calling *hyperpeople*, a book that's about what happens *after* we're all connected. The mobile is an essential element of that vision. We are all connected, constantly, because of these devices in our pockets.

Now that we're all connected, how do we use this connectivity wisely? Certainly we can all write games and fun little diversions – mobiles equipped with Mobile Java are great for that sort of thing. But the mobile is more than a toy; it's our connection to the social sphere. Mobiles are important not in themselves, but because they open up the network to everyone, everywhere, for whatever they will. So what do we will?

The best way to answer that question is by examining the way mobiles are used today. Short Message Service, SMS, is unquestionably the killer app for mobile phones. Billions are sent every year, and that number is constantly increasing. Last week I read a report which stated that teenage Koreans – surely in the forefront on such matters – regard email as old-fashioned, and principally communicate via SMS. Practically the only place that text messaging hasn't become a defining aspect of youth culture is in North America – principally because it costs more money to text someone than to make a call. Budget-conscious American kids are opting for voice over text.

Most text messages are not life-or-death affairs. A good portion of them are completely trivial. I can't tell you the number I've sent which consist simply of a smiley emoticon. They're simply a great way of being there, asynchronously, without needing to be there at all. In Australia, in Asia and Europe, SMS has become the de facto web which binds our social networks together. This is obvious to any heavy user of SMS. This trend – toward mobiles as the indispensable devices for social networking – is something that we can get out in front of. So my challenge to you here today is simple: it's time for all of us here – everyone who wants to make something of the mobile – to out there and make something of this network. We can already see which way the wind is blowing.

The trend I've identified – and that I am writing about in *hyperpeople* – is something that I've saddled with the unwieldy name of Mobile Digital Social Networks. It's an ugly term, but it's very descriptive. Let me unroll it for you, in reverse.

What is a network? A network, in its most generic sense, is a collection of coordinating entities. Notice I did not say “communicating entities.” Communication is not sufficient. A network is a network specifically because the messages which pass across it produce an emergent effect of coordination across the entire network. Communication without coordination is merely spam. Coordination is the difference which makes a difference.

Networks come in many varieties: there are computer networks, such as the Internet; biological networks, such as can be found in rain forests or within our cells; neural networks, which translate sensation into information; and social networks. Social networks emerge naturally when humans form into groups. The ability to communicate and form networks of coordinating entities is a basic, inherent characteristic of our species. It kept us alive on the plains of Africa, in the wastes of the Outback, and at the edges of the Ice Age glaciers. Scientists now believe that adolescent women spend a good portion of their developing brainpower on the management of their social networks. That's not a recent development: a woman who has a well-established social network can ensure that her children will be well-cared for. Biology may not be destiny, but it certainly defines tendencies. We have evolved to be excellent social networkers, because it gives us each individually the greatest chance for survival. And what is civilization but a social network on a grand scale?

Like email on the Internet, SMS has become the killer app for mobiles because it allows us to maintain our social networks at a distance. The social network, heretofore bound by geography and proximity, has been freed from its shackles; our social network is now always within reach, right there in our pockets. But until recently, these social networks have been informal entities, composed on an ad-hoc basis. That's changed, too.

Two years ago the “social network” sites – like [Friendster](#), [Orkut](#), [LinkedIn](#) and [TheFaceBook](#) – took things to the next level: digital social networks. Digital social networks rely on the “six degrees of separation” principle; you create a profile describing yourself, then you link to your friends, and so have links to their friends, and their friends’ friends, and so on. These digital social networks are actually addictive: my first week on Friendster I can only describe as “web crack.” I spent nearly all of my waking hours on the website, managing my profile, finding more people I knew, linking to them, then going through these friends to find other friends, and so on. That week on Friendster felt just like my first week on the Web, way back in 1993. Just as with my first experience of the Web, I knew social networks were something new and wonderful, something that would change the world. I couldn’t say how they would, but I knew it in my bones.

Then something strange happened: nothing. Nothing at all. It’s as if the promise of digital social networks was still-born. Was it all just so much post dot-com hype? Was I just imagining things? I sat and gave that one a good thought.

After I came to Australia, I spent a wonderful two days high on web crack provided by Orkut, which is Google’s digital social network. In addition to the normal profile page, Orkut allows you to set up communities, which are really just their version of good old-fashioned bulletin boards. I decided to test something out. I set up a community which I called “The List”, and provided it with this description:

Please share with the list the best book, movie, or track you've come across: this week, this year, this lifetime. Share the best. Enlighten your friends. Long explanations are unnecessary, and beside the point. Just share your list. Share early. Share often. Peace.

With The List, I provided my friends with a one-stop shop for “quality tips”. A place where my friends and their friends and their friends could share the best of what they’d come across with the rest of us. So I created The List, told many of my friends, and sat back and watched as about 50 people subscribed to The List in its first

week. For the first two weeks, I checked The List every day, or posted to it. I learned some good tips for movies, for books, for TV shows. Then...nothing. Over another month's time, The List quietly died.

Why did The List die? One possibility: it was too much work. You'd have to log into Orkut, then go over to The List, then use Orkut's less-than-stellar UI (shame on you, Google!) to read or post to The List. In our busy back-to-back daily life, that's just not something you're going to do on a regular basis. So, despite my best attempt to harness the latent power and expertise within my digital social network, The List died. But when it died, an idea came to life: I realized that *digital social networks are not static entities*; they aren't the profiles on pages or the links to your friends and friends' friends. Digital social networks are – or rather, should be – living, communicating entities. Digital social networks are like sharks: if they stop moving, if they stop consuming information, they stop being useful. They die.

Digital social networks amplify your social networks into instantaneity. The price for that amplification is a constant, unending need for data. In the aftermath of the failure of The List, I realized that digital social networks need to become proactive entities. Think of Google: how long would they reign as search king if they stopped their constant crawling and indexing of the web?

But there's a problem: we aren't in front of our web browsers all the time. We can't keep feeding our ravenous digital social networks. Or can we? And so we come to the mobile digital social network. When you pair the mobile with a digital social network you achieve instantaneity combined with pervasive ubiquity. This is something that's absolutely, entirely, completely new. You can, for example, give your friends a simple application for their mobile phone which allows them to share their quality tips, wherever and whenever they happen.

Now, at the beginning of this talk I said I wanted to share my thoughts. Because I am a programmer, I can share a very concrete version of my thoughts with you. So I invite you all to download [LiveRecord](#), a Mobile Java application which implements half of the system I've just described – the part that runs on the mobile. LiveRecord allows you to submit your quality tips to a back-end server. What happens after that

is what you make of it. A prototype LiveRecord server could be quickly hacked out in PHP and MySQL. It would allow you to access the top quality tips from your friends, while you share your quality tips with them. In fact, if you wanted to throw a little social engineering into the design – always a good thing – you’d probably want to make it a requirement that you have to submit a quality tip before you get one back. Then the list of tips would grow and grow and grow, until it was so useful that it would grow of its own accord – like Wikipedia.

So what’s it good for? Why is this a killer app? Consider this: one reason we build social networks is so we can stay constantly aware of the quality moments. Whether it’s around the campfire, the water cooler, or a table at the pub, we each share our moments of quality. We’re all experts in the things that give us pleasure. We are compelled by our essential nature as social beings to share these moments. They help make life worth living. And now, in the age of the mobile, those moments are constantly at hand. Better living, through quality.

The allure of the quality moments offered up by Mobile Digital Social Networks will make SMS seem like a weak opening act. LiveRecord is a bare-faced attempt to create another, more powerful form of “mobile crack.” I’m convinced *this* is the reason we’re all carrying mobiles around. SMS is informal and self-organizing, but it’s no more intelligent than the humans using it. A mobile digital social network adds a new element to the equation; we can take some of our “concrete intelligence” – programming code on an Internet stuffed full of powerful servers – add it to our digital social networks, and breathe life into them.

And that’s only one idea. There are a lot more coming, things you’ll never have expected. Mobiles are becoming the “you portal” – your constant connection to the universe of information we’re constantly bathed in. When we figure out that mobiles are about more than games, more than media – that mobiles represent a continuous connection to your digital self, that’s when things will begin to explode. The dot-com bubble was nothing to what’s coming up. Sure, there will be lots of ridiculous ideas floated – but some will rise to the top. And these will change the way we live, the

way we work, the way we think. Because the network is here. And it's time to make of it what we will.

What fun!

Mark Pesce

Sydney

7 Caban (31 January 2005)

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 559 Nathan Abbott Way, Stanford, California 94305, USA.