



BREAKING OUT OF DEFAULT THINKING

**Howard Rheingold**

Thu Jul 29 18:45:00 GMT 2004

Score: **+91**

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SOFTWARE

Successful mobile applications build on the core functionality of mobile phones, not try to emulate desktop PCs, designer Scott Jenson contends.

After hearing and reading Scott Jenson's [rants on "default thinking"](#) in the design of mobile services, I asked him what he's seen that breaks out of backward-looking design thinking. He replied:

"Another strong and under-appreciated aspect of mobile phone use is the personalization people do to their phones. This is usually in the form of snap on covers, ring-tones or wallpaper. However, in Japan it goes even farther to the 'tassels' that get added, even hand painting of the covers. This is clearly a deep social need being reflected in what is, at one level, just a piece of geeky technology. People have often called this process 'turning a phone into jewelry,' but it is missing the point. People are turning their phones into a stand-in for themselves. Some provocative ideas come from examining this need and 'Web-izing' it, expanding it into cyberspace.

"The idea I'm working on right now is what I call 'PictureFrame,' where everyone would have a personal 'picture' that represents them, much like snap on covers and ringtones do today. However, this would be more like a very personal Web site. It is a visual projection of my personality. The key difference is that this visual projection would be visible to all phone users. Instead of just 'calling' me, you could 'look at my picture' before calling. While there is tremendous social value in doing this only for style and image projection, it would clearly get old fairly quickly. It could be enhanced two ways. The most obvious is that people could change it frequently but that is only a path of diminishing returns.

"Picking a visual style is the broad stroke that sets the stage. 'Real functionality' can be layered on top to add infinite variety and finish. For example, overlaid on top of my cool montage of jazz musicians would be my 'away message', my call state, or even my battery level. If we crack the permissions problem properly and you are in my inner circle, you could even see my location (an intentionally vague location (soho district) might even have more value as it gives enough information without invading my privacy).

"In this way, your Picture becomes a proxy for you, a primitive gatekeeper giving potential callers more info than they had before. Instead of just blasting a phone call to you no matter where you are, I can 'peek in' to see you and find out you are busy and want only SMS right now. Or quite the opposite, you're bored and want calls now!

"This is really nothing more than the presence feature of IM. However, by looking at through a phone-based ethnography, we end up inverting it. It becomes much more than just IM: it is a gateway to a new way of interacting socially on phones.. This must be done through simple Web standards so the picture could be much like a Web page: presentation and functionality together. This would allow it to grow and morph as services become more sophisticated over time. This can't be owned or controlled, it has to be as simple as HTML, the functionality needs to be self-describing so the radical fringe can try also sorts of cool experiments.

"The reason I call it PictureFrame and not just Picture is that there is a Frame component as well. I won't go into detail now, but roughly it is the way a phone handles a collection of pictures. This is the Yang to the pictures' Yin. By making the Frame completely proprietary and specific to each handset you give the handset manufacturers something to compete over. There are a zillion cool things you could do with Frames (when looking at your picture, I can see the last 3 calls we made, the last 3 messages we sent and (boring business use) any upcoming meetings we have scheduled) Frames could even be a source of my "Tap" concept.

"The key point about Frames is that it 'gives in' to the marketing reality of differentiation. I've learned in working through so many meetings with handset makers and service providers that they have a strong need for control. The problem is that all mobile services have been monolithic, so the control is over the entire product. By leaving the Picture free and completely open, you unlock the kind of innovation that created the web. The Frame is the pressure release valve that still allows competition to the handset makers.

"For this to really take off, it has to be P2P so the servers can't 'own' anything. There are some deep network issues that if not done well could bring this idea to its knees. Even with 3G speeds, we can't be wasteful with bandwidth. This would have to be technically very clever to pull off.

"I want the mobile market to open up and hundreds of concepts to be tried out. I hope that 3G combined with programmable phones will allow P2P concepts to be tested. The challenge to the industry is to get off its fat ass and start to experiment more: Fail fast, learn fast.

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"I focused on PictureFrame because it is a P2P app that shares the ultimate content -- information about me and my friends. Admittedly, it is very simple information, but it's a well-grounded set of information that has strong social value. I keep coming back to P2P communication concepts as that is the core function of a mobile phone. I want to extend what phones are good at, not try to take away from what desktops are good at.

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COMMENTS

WML for mobile IM?

Being able to take a picture or record video with a camera phone and then send it to a friend with txt (a caption?) would, I think, be great.

The real question is whether to rely on the big vendors to create such p2p networks, or to try to mobilize the idea from the ground up.

A system that allows for easy creation of WML content directly from phones, which could then be delivered to others without having to rely on proprietary mechanisms would be my choice.

[paulbhartzog](#)

Fri Jul 30 21:43:53 GMT 2004

Score: +2

RE: WML for mobile IM?

Asking the networks to do P2P is like asking Microsoft to do Napster. There needs to be a level playing field to explore and create new social services. This, by definition, must be out of the 'control' of any company.

The value of PictureFrame is that it has the classic web concept of an open standard to allow experimentation (the picture) and the proprietary piece to allow handsets/operators to spec custom/differentiating applications.

We aren't going to break out of the mobile stagnation until we start talking about the "Tragedy of the commons" and how the old internet style of open innovation will be a driving force to make it happen

[ScottJenson](#)

Mon Aug 02 02:26:10 GMT 2004

Score: +2 Insightful

RE: WML for mobile IM?

Perhaps. However, as [Dan Bricklin](#) has noted, peer-to-peer networks create a [Cornucopia of the Commons](#).

The exigencies regarding who has the best incentives to create and protect commons are complex, and it remains to be seen who will prevail: cooperatives, states, firms, or other new forms of organization we have yet to witness.

It's good to see you here, Scott.

[paulbhartzog](#)

Mon Aug 02 06:25:38 GMT 2004

Score: +1

RE: WML for mobile IM?

Your comment is right on target. My point was to avoid the tragedy and create a cornucopia, we have to start thinking different. I especially enjoyed the other comment from Marshall McLuhan, it summarized the point well.

We seem to be discussing a few powerful issues and I don't want to mix them. "Default THinking" is about how we design, but the "Cornucopia of the commons" is more about markets.

Both are important but I would claim that the market issues are ones which are most restrictive right now. My experience with the handset makers and the operators has made me cautious that the mobile industry is going to be a true market like the internet was in the early days.

My hope is the getting 3G on handsets with fixed IPs will allow Java/Symbian type handsets to start experimenting with P2P concepts. This won't be the delivery platforms of choice for most consumers of

course, but we've got to get started somewhere. What worries me most is that operators may drag their feet and create 'closed nets' where they have strong control over what type of data is sent (and received). Any comments from more technically competent readers on the ability of 3G systems to be more open from this perspective?

Scott

[ScottJenson](#)

Mon Aug 02 14:35:39 GMT 2004

Score: +1

Rear-view innovation

How coincidental the story about the fixed movie cameras in your earlier post – great! I also used that example in an article I wrote regarding how we look to the past for clues and hints to navigate to the future. Marshall McLuhan was especially prescient about this when he said "...We look at the present through a rear view mirror. We march backwards into the future..."

www.mediatoolbox.co.za/pebble.asp?reid=32 94

I agree wholeheartedly with Scott's view that open innovation is the key to breaking out of the thinking traps that inhibit fresh ideas to emerge from the telecom design engineers 'pond'. The clever stuff happens at the edge and the firms that create meaningful feedback mechanisms from their users will win. Check out Boro Douthwaite's stuff regarding novelty generation a la natural selection (in his case regarding agricultural innovation).

[sdehaast](#)

Mon Aug 02 13:38:02 GMT 2004

Score: +1

RE: Rear-view innovation

URL gremlins gobbled the above web address – remove the space in the URL.

Also, a summary of Boru Douthwaite's work:
<http://www.id21.org/society/s4bbd1g1.html>

[sdehaast](#)

Mon Aug 02 13:49:24 GMT 2004

Score: +1

Frustrated Thinking

Every time I upgrade my phone, I'm amazed at the lack of innovative thinking shown by the manufacturing cartel. It's time for the network operators to demand radically simple services that we consumers have tested and approved. Go for it, Scott.

[michaelgregg](#)

Mon Aug 02 21:54:11 GMT 2004

Score: +1

Mobile P2P Content

Hi Howard,

Interesting article – Thanks.

My sense is that mobile carriers are already active in the P2P space but fail to recognize that they are, and therefore fail to leverage it. Every time you or I call or SMS someone (almost certainly someone we have a commercial or social relationship with) we create and share P2P voice content.

Missing the strategic nature of this observation, carriers are now eyeing the transactional billing relationship they have with their customers as a vehicle to sell us content, most of it B2C content that we don't currently pay for on the web. Vodafone's live! content service is a good example of this. Very few mobile carriers appear to be making money from brokering the sale of B2C content in this manner.

I believe the value of the content we consume using our mobile devices is directly proportional to the importance we place on our relationship with the author of that content. In other words, if it comes from someone I know and trust then I'll pay to access and consume it. I'm less inclined to do likewise for other content types.

[AndrewKissling](#)

Mon Aug 02 22:39:10 GMT 2004

Score: +2 Insightful

RE: Mobile P2P Content

Andrew, if we are lucky, Scott will be along to respond. I would say that SMS is not truly p2p because it is centralized through the operator's server. As a control affordance (send an sms to buy a ticket that arrives as a bar code that is scanned at an event) or as a micro-billing mechanism (send an sms to get a map), SMS could be a powerful tool for a community of developers -- but p2p wouldn't require waiting until the operator decides to offer a service. The operator would support a platform that would enable thousands of entrepreneurs to offer services, or for people to form ad-hoc associations like Bibster or SETI@home.

[howard](#)

Tue Aug 03 01:17:22 GMT 2004

Score: +3

RE: Mobile P2P Content

As posted in a previous comment, there are two issues, WHAT are we going to do and HOW are we going to do it. Understanding the HOW is my first step. The goal is to get to a proper 'classic internet' environment where we can create P2P apps and let them rip. The big problem with GPRS apps right now is that it is difficult to keep a data connection open between two points. (I'll go into the details if necessary)

I'm hoping tech heads with much more background will be able to enlighten us on the issues underpinning 3G and if we really can get permanent IP addresses to our phones we can start trickling data between devices. That is a BIG step I hope we'll be able to do with 3G handsets.

As to your point about friends and sharing, I agree. While the amount of WAP and other data services are on the rise, they are trivial to the interactions that occur over voice and SMS. Creating services that leverage these 'social protocols' are going to be the next killer services. Predicting them is always a challenge, but I want to at least give it a go, and start with some of the concepts listed above and see what happens. That is, in a nutshell, what innovation is about. Trying something out, watching it VERY carefully and trying again. I feel that even if some of these services 'fail' the learnings will be so great that the 'next thing' will be significantly easier to see.

What surprises me is that the space is so dominated with these 'data services' type apps which seem to be almost entirely dominated by "What will you pay \$5 for?" mentality when what we should be thinking about is "What are people doing with their phones now? How can we extend that?" That approach is what is going to create the "next SMS".

Scott

[ScottJenson](#)

Tue Aug 03 03:20:10 GMT 2004

Score: +1