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YOUR CELLPHONE: THE REMOTE CONTROL FOR YOUR LIFE

By Peter A. Breen

It's not just the way you use a cellphone to get everything from your car to your house, but the way you use it to get everything from your house to your car. In a new twist, a company called Yellow Arrow is using a mobile phone to send a message to a car, telling it to start an engine or to open a door. The technology company, LaunchLab Inc., isn't asking for anything more than a text message from a mobile phone. Rather, it lets people use their cellphones to do things that were once done by a remote control.

THE ART OF MOBILE TECHNOLOGY

By Nancy A. Tomlinson

A program that lets you use a mobile phone to send a message to a car, telling it to start an engine or to open a door, is a new twist on the art of mobile technology. The program, called Yellow Arrow, is a way to use a mobile phone to send a message to a car, telling it to start an engine or to open a door. The technology company, LaunchLab Inc., isn't asking for anything more than a text message from a mobile phone. Rather, it lets people use their cellphones to do things that were once done by a remote control.



The art of mobile technology

As pragmatic uses grow for cellphones, mobile technology is also expanding into creative territory.

New public space art projects are using cellphones and other mobile devices to explore new ways of communicating while giving everyday people the chance to share some insights about real world locations.

One art project, Yellow Arrow, based in New York City, has developed a system where people can place yellow stickers in the shape of arrows around the city, stating that they have something to say about that particular location. Each arrow, which is ideally placed in a location that holds significance to the person, has its own unique code that can be sent to a mobile phone via text messaging, allowing others to read the message that was left.

"Yellow Arrow gives anybody that chance to have, in a certain sense, a mini-billboard," said Jesse Shapins one of the creative collaborators for Counts media, the company that created yellowarrow.net to explore the hidden details of cities.

"It's a way in which anybody has the opportunity to point out what they found to be interesting and important," he said.

People are encouraged to place arrows with permission on private property. "It's actually a neat part of the project that if you're placing it in your favorite café that you talk to the café owner and then maybe some personal relationship is established as well," said Shapins.

Other media based projects that focus on psychogeography, or the exploration of public spaces and the different methods of navigating them, have also adopted the cellphone as a way of encouraging people to view the city through the eyes of their fellow citizens.

The Canadian project [murmur] which began in 2002, focuses on experiencing stories through their locations in a similar manner to Yellow Arrow. When people spot the [murmur] sign, which is shaped like an ear, they can call a telephone number on their cellphone, type in the sign's specific code, and listen to a story about the location while standing in it.

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The stories, which are told by everyday people, said Shawn Micallef, the creative director of [murmur], are first submitted to the project's website, www.murmurtoronto.ca. Micallef then personally meets with the person to record the story in the location that it took place.

"I want to change spaces into places," he said. "People ignore a lot of stuff in our surroundings, but once you lay a narrative on it, it becomes a place. You might dislike the story but you can't ignore it."

Having lived in Toronto, where the project is based, for four to five years, Micallef said [murmur] helped him learn details about the city that it might have normally taken him 20 to 30 years to learn.

Technology can even bring the Internet itself right onto the streets, with websites like grafedia.net, a new urban project created by John Geraci, a graduate student at New York University. Grafedia is blue, underlined text that can be written anywhere: a park bench, a bathroom wall, even on people. The word can be sent to @grafedia.net via cellphone and an image will be sent to the phone.

"The boundaries drawn on the World Wide Web that you need a computer are totally arbitrary," said Geraci. "The Internet can be anywhere. Not only can you read a webpage, you can actually write and create them yourself."

While psychogeography has been around since the 1950s, only recently have well-documented active experiments emerged to explore public spaces, said Christina Ray, the founder and creative developer of Glowlab.com, a Web-based magazine that focuses on psychogeography.

"Sometimes the more you need people to participate, the harder it is to start them," she said. "If you throw it out there among the chaos of the city and it's compelling enough, it will last."

Yellowarrow.net, launched in September as a small public street art project in New York City, now claims to have a little over 2,000 yellow arrows registered worldwide. Relationships have been established with countries all over Europe, from Germany, which has the first region-specific website, to Norway.

Locally, Yellow Arrow is part of an exhibition at the Photo Resource Center at Boston University in conjunction with the CyberArts Festival that is being held through May 5. Shapins estimates that there could be a few hundred yellow arrows posted throughout Boston and he sees the project continually growing with possibilities in video messaging and more theatrical and game-like components.

"In a lot of ways, it is a game and it's about really waking up to all of the details around you," he said.

While your cellphone now allows you to play games, check your e-mail, send text messages, take pictures, and oh, yeah, make phone calls, it can perhaps serve a more enriching purpose.

Maybe the next phone call you make or the next text message you send could possibly tell you something about the city you never noticed.

- Stacy M. Perlman

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