

# Perceived Proximity and Contemporary Communication

The perception of distance is minimized as advances are made among mobile devices, gaming and online technology. Communication and information is easily accessible for better or worse. Physical distance is no longer a limitation in contacting, meeting or discovering people throughout the world. The convenience and tools of the internet, communication networks and portability of mobile phones, gaming consoles, accessibility of video conference, and telecommuting have allowed for an almost entirely connected global world. This network allows for individuals to be heard, receive and contribute to an organic virtual system supported by hardware orbiting the earth, super-computers, the public switched telephone network, internet, fiber optic cable, RFID chips, GPS units, and billions of users, mobile devices, laptop and desktop computers.

Users are the sole integral component of the global communication network. And, as they become increasingly aware of their world through the network and contribute to it, they in turn direct content and the advancements to grow the network and sub-networks. Content just as the network, have over time grown and changed in form and delivery. Just as with the internet, conventional and static brochure web pages are becoming increasingly obsolete. The internet is a diverse network and serves many functions focused on users. Rich Internet Applications (RIA) are tools designed to do just that and address the specific needs of the modern day user by making content more accessible, dynamic and relevant.

RIA's are essential in growing and supporting content. They can be very effective singular tools or designed to become organic and grow with new content. Yahoo ([maps.yahoo.com](http://maps.yahoo.com)) and Google Maps ([maps.google.com](http://maps.google.com)) are two such RIA's that have evolved since their original creation. They are unique multi-faceted RIA's designed specifically for geographic mapping, but have changed over time to also serve as platforms for user generated content, and integration. Yahoo Maps' Flash API tool allows users to entirely customize and skin the application. When embedded with other RIA's, it then contributes to create even more unique and advanced applications. Google Map mash-ups are similar and also very common. The Google Map mash-up technology is robust and integrates into sophisticated AJAX applications or even simple HTML pages. The mash-up can be found charting everything from the contents of a phone book's yellow pages in local areas, subway and bus

routes, to maybe even someday tracking a nearby taxi cab using GPS ([www.dash.net](http://www.dash.net)).

While RIA's are tools, and platforms to communicate, their worth is typically measured in content. Users who create content strive to contribute, have their voices heard, and discover their place within the global network, and specifically, the internet. A sense of portraying an identity within the internet has been seemingly illusive in the past. Now platforms exist that promote and provide opportunities for self-expression. And, for the first time users are connecting through the world and internet in more sophisticated ways with more revealing identities.

Web sites like flickr ([www.flickr.com](http://www.flickr.com)) have become revolutionary in creating a global network. The web site is a photography catalog of artists' work of all grades. Users can post images or personalized notes, extend invitations and participate in one of the world's largest exhibitions where the user is their own individual curator. The experience is often highly personal, and reveals a sense of user identity and user experiences. On flickr, users can choose to share and portray their work in a professional manner or take a personalized approach intended for select audiences or friends. Some progressive users have even challenged the conventional applications of flickr and catalog their own lives and personal possessions to share for the whole world. Thus using flickr as a medium for creating art in documenting their presence in the form of non-representational self portraits. No matter, how a user may choose to use Flickr, the web site provides a platform for individuals to be seen and heard. Users can choose to utilize and promote their own space the same way an artist may choose to utilize a gallery or even use the site as a medium to create art.

Flickr with the likes of other infamous web sites are changing the way we connect with the world. Blogs and forums are not new, but connect users with content, inspiration and reveal a great deal about authors. Jonathan Harris is a new media web artist who has explored the use of blogs in his work to generate content, and the emotional states of the authors projected in blog entries. We Feel Fine ([www.wefeelfine.org](http://www.wefeelfine.org)), is an interesting interactive project pulling blog entries from the internet that begin or contain the string of words "I feel". The effect is mesmerizing, dwarfing and infinite. Hundreds of balls represent people and their entries as they bounce in space and reveal the personal effects left by the authors. The collection of entries into one singular space to be read, categorized and connected to for one single moment destroys the perceived bounds of distance. Authors and viewers are brought together in one location. The entries represent the authors for a brief moment in

time as part of a network of humans experiencing life and the range of emotions in one dance of dynamic movement.

From interactive works of art connecting people, to forums and RIA's, nothing has created quite the same effect as social networks of recent such as friendster (friendster.com), facebook (facebook.com), and myspace (myspace.com). Users on these web sites are connecting and proclaiming their identities in ways unknown before to the internet. Myspace in particular is very unique and popular. This web site and it's millions of users allow individuals to create and customize a profile page using all the latest internet technologies with limited restrictions. Most importantly, users are able to include videos, audio, imagery and decorate their page as they would their own Junior high school locker or scrapbook. Profile pages come together as other users add messages and comments or proclaim their friendship. Over time the pages reveal user self-reflection, and an identity perceived by their friends. The effects are varied and consist of simple popularity contests, horrible web design, spam, musicians pushing their latest tour dates, and complete profile pages generated to advertise the latest Hollywood television show or film. Nonetheless, Myspace like Flickr have given users control and the tools to express and portray themselves to a large collective audience. The possibilities and scale of self expression are limitless, and inspiring.

Second Life (secondlife.com) has taken the notion of social networking into a new evolution and ambition. The Second Life world is a virtual 3-D interactive society consisting of community, commerce, entertainment and even government institutions. For the first time, an online application exists representing users in the full 3-D form as an avatar (visual character representation of user). In this world, users can purchase goods, customize their appearances, meet other users from around the world, interact in a virtual online community, and even go beyond human abilities and fly like a super hero. The Second Life world also boasts places of congregation for users to travel to, socialize, purchase goods, or even find a haven in their own nation's embassy. Allowing users to contribute content to the entire experience such as introducing new destinations, objects, as well as goods and services is the real innovation within Second Life. Contributions continually add to the wealth of the RIA and in return create more rich and engaging user experiences.

Sony's Home developed for the Play Station 3 (PS3) console has taken a great deal of inspiration from Second Life in pushing the virtual world model even further. With a predictable PS3 hardware base, Sony was able

to develop Home and create better over-all appearances, avatar enhancements, more complex virtual living and communal spaces, as well as give users and sponsors abilities to customize dwellings and communal spaces. The standardized hardware has greatly increased user experience in Home and surpassed that of the online world of Second Life which is challenged by the limited user hardware configurations.

Within Home groups of users can also coordinate online game play from within the virtual environment void of interruption or limitation. The real fascinating abilities of Home are user experience and interactivity. Users are able to meet and socialize with other users through their avatars, in a more similar real world fashion than ever introduced in an artificial environment. Users can even entertain and invite acquaintances to their customized dwellings where they can show off new furniture purchased within Home or trophies earned for high PS3 game scores. From a sociological perspective, Home's abilities will allow for closer real world group social activity and communication. In Home, users may tend to reflect their actual personalities, and associate with other users and groups naturally. The major obstacle is separating deviant and authentic behavior. With little consequence, users find themselves much less inhibited, outgoing, and insulting. In Home users will be able to report misbehavior and potentially boot others from the Home network creating a more harmonious virtual society.

As more virtual worlds, spaces, and networks come into bloom, the idea of identity within the virtual is still something of a work in progress. The internet, and gaming consoles have made dramatic gains in capturing user identity, and building platforms to connect users. With more advances and availability in broadband technology, in conjunction with mobile devices and computer hardware becoming more sophisticated and small, user identity will continue to leave less to the imagination.

Cellular phones have been promising in seemingly paving a way for self-sufficiency, connection and independence within the global network. Continued computer processor miniaturization will push mobile devices to become even more transparent extensions of the human body and could eventually replace the need for PDA devices and a home desktop computer.

The United States has been slow to embrace cellular phones as tools beyond directly communicating with people, or make the advancements in technology and carrier services to motivate more sophisticated devices. Although promising signs have been made like VCAST and Flash player support, east Asian markets such as

South Korea, and Japan are still dramatically ahead in comparison. Current cellular consumer trends in these two particular countries will shape what one may come to expect in the near future for the United States and rest of the world. Looking even further down the road, one may begin to speculate how the future could be laid out and the place cellular phones will have there as well.

90% of South Korea's households connect with broadband and almost every teen and adult carry a cellular phone, making it one of the most connected nations on the planet. Boasting a small geographic size, dense population and big ambitions to hold it's own against the giant neighbor of China, South Korea is pinned in a unique position as a technology revolutionary paving a path for the world in communication services, networking and hardware. Korea Telecom (KT) is Korea's premier telecom operator and one such company leading the world in communication networks. Their WiBro system based on the next-generation IPv6 will allow for 16 megabit per second speeds for computers and cellular phones, and most importantly open up more IP addresses. KT is actively working to implement this as a standard and selling the service to various South Korean providers. If successful IPv6 and the 16 megabit per second connection will allow for cell phone video conference applications and large file downloads anytime anywhere. South Korean cell phone users will be able to utilize internet mobility, and speed that will invariably inspire more internet applications for cell phones and possibly less dependence on PC's.

The fascinating aspect of South Korea and WiBro is the effect it may have on neighboring Asian nations and the world. If Korea is able to sell WiBro services to China and as China's economy and population continue to embrace sophisticated cell phones and support adequate networks, greater markets will blossom and influence the rest of the world. The mammoth population of China and their cell phone users will undoubtedly inspire great applications that will revolutionize the way people around the world use their cell phone.

Beyond boosting cell phone internet speeds, another great prospect with IPv6 adaptation in the world is in the increase of IP addresses. The shortage of IP addresses is problematic. With IPv6, more available IP addresses will allow for mobiles devices and even automobiles to have an IP address. The possibilities are simply endless. Imagine in the near future before a typical morning commute, you are able to monitor traffic conditions before you even get in your car all from your cell phone. Automobile IP addresses are not too far off, and with many cars already equipped with GPS, the scenario is quite feasible.

IPv6 is one component that will change the way users perceive and talk to the global network. But, just as one piece of a puzzle is placed, other pieces remain in the larger picture. Opening the doors to broader internet capabilities will inspire greater use of cell phones, but there are also fundamental problems due to the nature of their size that are many years away from being corrected.

Small cell phone screen sizes are severely problematic, primitive, and limit user experiences from reading content to watching video. Symbol ([www.symbol.com](http://www.symbol.com)) is a revolutionary company in the cell phone industry working to address these exact concerns. Symbol has been working on creating miniature scanning and projection devices that could potentially solve small cell phone screen sizes. Projectors could become a standard feature within a cell phone and allow users to project the device's display onto large flat surfaces as an alternative or primary viewing area. Corrective key-stone software and gyroscopes within cell phones could also solve and correct perspective skewing in warping of the projected display. The same theories could even be applied to create a portable projected full size keyboard. The ultimate goal would include eventually reducing and incorporating desktop PC's into entire cell phones. The portability of an office, personal library of photos, video and music could be taken and fit within the pocket of a jacket. Merging capabilities and allowing units to act as one would forever change the way humans act, interact, and live. The cell phone will then become the gateway device individuals use to connect to the internet, and no longer be restricted to their homes or personal computers.

The global world is on the cusp of becoming a smaller place for those connected users. The communication footprint of humanity will hopefully become mobile, and wireless. As the move continues into the future, it is important to be mindful of the system at large. The integration complexity of all working components need to work together in order to achieve more goals in bringing societies together and spreading the wealth of knowledge.

No one single web site, internet network, cell phone or technology advancement will advance communication. The desire for content and wealth of information will. As more and more people throughout the world participate in the advancement and accessibility of information, the closer we will come to design better systems and tools. Tools that will allow for individual self express, communication, learning, and bring people and cultures together.

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