

Book Review

There's Not an App for That: A Personal Reflection on Coauthoring a Book with Gary Marsden

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Simon Robinson, Gary Marsden, and Matt Jones, **There's Not an App for That: Mobile User Experience Design for Life**, 2014, Burlington, MA: Morgan Kaufman. Print ISBN: 9780124166912, eBook ISBN: 9780124166998, 448 pp., \$42.46 (paperback and e-book).



Backstory

Toward the end of 2012, Gary Marsden, Matt Jones, and I spoke several times about writing a book focused on mobile user experiences that go beyond touch-screen smartphones and pages full of apps. By early 2013, we had found a publisher, and between late 2013 and early 2014, we wrote the material.

But Gary died suddenly on December 27, 2013. Being Gary, he had already completed the vast majority of his part of the text. His focus in the book was on two themes: the obvious passion that drove his work at the University of Cape Town (which we called “From Some to All”—chapter 19) and a more recent interest around mindful interaction (chapters 16–18).

In December 2014, the book was published: **There's Not an App for That: Mobile User Experience Design for Life**. This article aims to open a window into the ideas Gary was thinking about for the book, and the future user-experience thinking and insight that he wanted to share with the world.

From Distanced to Mindful Interaction

Apps can distance people from one another. Although they clearly connect us—whether in the same room or on the other side of the world—they also tempt us away from thinking about the real people we are connecting *with*. Our phones help us keep in touch with contacts and friends, but have these evolved into just another task to be done via an app?

In recent years, Gary had become increasingly interested in interaction that really helped users think about who they are actually connecting to. Rather than me-focused interactions, he wanted to turn the tables to focus on the people on the other side of the communication. In his writing and research for the book, Gary began by thinking about the legacy of the telephone (distance—*tele*; speaking—*phone*). It turns out that our apps and infrastructures are still oriented toward these sorts of interactions; we connect with people, but at the same time we distance ourselves from their real, physical lives.

Mindful interaction, in Gary's words, was “about being very close to people; in their ‘now,’ even when physically apart” (p. 299). He wondered why handsets could not automatically take care of many of the distancing tasks we have to do, and in the process open up for better local digital interactions. So, for example, he imagined handsets that would automatically highlight the free dates in a colocated group's calendars, or ones that would allow truly local content sharing rather than this being funneled through remote data centers.

The mindful opportunities discussed in the book are separated into two themes. First, there is the potential

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for more mindful apps—those that highlight the people involved rather than the task being done. Second, Gary thought about more radical arguments for moving away from app-based mobile design. Instead of furthering the current trend of being constantly connected to remote services, he took inspiration from usability experts such as Scott Jenson and wrote about how alternative interaction infrastructures could lead to mobiles that help users become more aware of the people, places, and possibilities that are meaningful to them in their daily lives.

From Some to All

The book contains six main themes, of which five are framed as *problem* chapters coupled with two or more *opportunity* chapters. Gary was very clear from the start that the development work he dedicated so much of his time to, and which forms the penultimate chapter of the book—“From Some to All”—should not be framed in this way. There are huge opportunities to have a real developmental impact in the sorts of situations and contexts Gary focused on. But there is no reason why opportunities for incorporating life's richness and diversity into mobile interaction—as discussed in the rest of the book—should not also apply in these contexts.

To get readers thinking about these types of approaches, “From Some to All” explores ways of handling resource constraints that are less common outside of developing regions, showing how these can guide innovations both in these communities and beyond. For example, one of Gary's previous insights was the concept of a human access point—a person or organization who is highly connected and influential in an area and who can help greatly with understanding potential users and with the design and testing of new ideas in unfamiliar situations. Other research projects—such as Andrew Maunder, Richard Harper, and Gary's Snap 'n Grab system, for example—have led to new strands of thinking around both local sharing and cloudlet-based services.

Several years before we started writing *There's Not an App for That*, Gary, Matt, several other international partners, and I collaborated on a research project in a rural community in South Africa's Eastern Cape. The aim was to provide a way for community members to record and store digital media from their phones on a central digital tablet-based communal repository. The idea was that people would be able to share media with others in the community via the tablet, regardless of their phone storage space, airtime availability, or battery charge. Then, when those other community members visited the repository, they could view the media that had been left for them and save a copy to their own phone.

The interface we developed centered on a panoramic image of the surrounding village that people could swipe to move around. The image matched the view from the tablet's actual physical location, so sharing media with another person became a simple matter of finding the target person's house and choosing the correct resident. We were pleased with this design and felt it was particularly appropriate for users who were not textually literate or familiar with computer interfaces. We imagined users comparing the real-world view in front of them with the photo on the tablet, and just choosing the right *rondavel* (traditional circular hut) on-screen to share.

To accompany the media repository and provide both electrical power and a place for the tablet to be kept, Gary designed and hand-built a mobile solar-powered charging station that would allow residents to recharge their phones while they shared media. The charging station was on a wheeled trolley, so it could be moved around to catch the sun or stored indoors in bad weather. The tablet was kept in a box on top.

Predictably, over the six-month deployment period, Gary's charging station—which fulfilled a clear user need and was both practical and robust—saw at least an order of magnitude more usage than the neglected tablet-based sharing interface. At the end of the research project, the community officially adopted the charging station, whereas the media repository was ultimately repurposed into a more appropriate form.

This outcome perfectly illustrates the sorts of challenges and opportunities that are highlighted in the penultimate chapter of the book. What Gary developed in the charging station can be seen as more of a platform-level tool. The charging station didn't just provide a useful service to local people; it allowed innovation and customization on top of what was originally designed. Community members were able to both repair

and modify its components, whereas the media repository worked only in a rather restrictive way that did not necessarily cater to local people's real needs. Had we been able to let residents really shape the digital part of the tool to their needs, perhaps it would have been more widely used.

Although issues such as resource constraint are often the primary drivers of development work, Gary's ideas about how a platform-based model of thinking could truly support local people in appropriate innovation really stand out. He demonstrated this model in both his research writing and the things he made, such as the charging station. In his words, "platforms can remove both technical and commercial barriers, and also lower the entry bar for those wishing to provide a service, and those wishing to consume it."

Conclusions

As Gary wrote in his closing words for "From Some to All," the term *digital divide* is unfortunate, because it conveys the expectation that purely by inserting the digital we can close the divide. This is clearly not true, as has been demonstrated many times over—including, of course, in our and Gary's work. However, Gary was a firm believer in the view that just because digital alone cannot close the divide, this does not mean it is not a large part of the solution.

One of the last things Gary did was to produce a video highlighting the work of the ICT4D lab at the University of Cape Town, encouraging others to get involved in his team's research. As he says in the video's introduction, most technology that gets built is created by people excited by the technology itself. Gary's approach was to focus on people first, understanding real needs and developing technology to meet them. His work for the book captures both his spirit and passion for this sort of work. He is greatly missed. ■

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