

Technology

History at the end of a phone

Some amazing stories lurk in [murmur]'s little green ears

|By Joseph Wilson

Noticed those signs fastened to utility poles shaped like green ears? Call the number on the sign with your cellphone and you'll be treated to a story by an area resident or a historian about the very place you're standing.

[briefbreak]

The project, dubbed [murmur] by creators Gabe Sawhney, Shawn Micallef and James Roussel is a wonderful melding of technology with the cultural capital of Toronto's diverse neighbourhoods.

All you need is your cellphone to uncover the rich tapestry of stories set on our city streets.

"When we started five years ago, around half of the people in Toronto had cellphones," says Sawhney at [murmur]'s fifth-anniversary bash last week, "so we thought maybe this might be a viable platform... to get messages out." Instead of focusing on complicated PDA tours or downloadable podcasts, Sawhney wants to keep the technology simple and cheap, so as many people as possible can enjoy the stories. "Cellphones used to be a toy for the rich, or a businessman's tool," he says, "but now they're everywhere."

The cellphone is also essentially an audio medium. "We see ourselves picking up the tradition of oral storytelling," says Sawhney. "There's an amazing subtlety and richness that comes out in voices. We want to create an intimacy that you don't get through screen-based platforms."

The popularity of this concept has allowed [murmur] to spread to cities like Edinburgh, São Paulo and Dublin. In each city, people can access stories by dialing a local number, but they're stored as MP3s on [murmur]'s server here in Toronto.

"Our main server is at 401 Richmond West," says Sawhney. "It allows us to centralize the content management."

They keep costs manageable using Voice-over-Internet Protocol (VoIP), which allows phone calls to travel over the Internet. "It's a local number in every city, but the calls are all routed over the Net so no one pays long distance."

Just as the VoIP aspect is invisible to the user, the group is careful not to make the project seem too tech-intensive. While they use a GoogleMap platform for organizing their story locations on their own server, they don't make that interface public.

"I don't want [murmur] to be mistaken for a GoogleMap mashup. It's not about dots on a map; it's about stories," says Sawhney.

For those without cellphones, the stories can still be heard on their website by clicking on creative, hand-drawn maps (www.murmurtoronto.ca). The stories are not available as downloadable podcasts, however.

"That's not the experience we want people to have," says Sawhney. He worries that when people are glued to their iPod menus, they'll miss the spontaneity of discovering a green sign.

"[murmur] is about exploring places. The signs aren't numbered; you're supposed to wander around and figure out your own path."

Thankfully, there are more of those paths to follow this summer. The crew just launched a project on Church during this year's Pride festivities. They will soon be unveiling signs in the Junction and have just completed a multimedia project called Big Stories Little India (www.savac.net/littleindia), documenting life along Gerrard East, involving the efforts of local artists and community leaders.

So keep your eyes open for those green ears. Your view of the city will never be the same. 3

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