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Psychogeography in the City: the Application of Dérive in a Modern Urban Landscape

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Abstract

A certain pleasure can be found in novel situations, in experiencing something fresh. Moving beyond what is normally comfortable and being involved in a mutable experience can create joy and indelible diversions. This notion of moving beyond what is in a person's normal scope of behavior was coined by Guy Debord, a twentieth century Marxist theorist and writer, under the name "Dérive". Debord viewed Dérive as a "a mode of experimental behavior linked to the conditions of urban society: a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances"[2]. This paper discusses an Android application that uses a list of instructions to move the users through a city to places they have not been before, by means not previously taken, and encourages involvement with the world around them to create memorable experiences. The application, called "Derive", generates instructions for action, allows the user to plot their location using the Google Maps API, take pictures with a custom wrapper for the Android camera, and record custom titles and notes for each instruction they follow.

1. Introduction

Dérive was an idea defined by Guy Debord during November 1956 in the publishing "Les lèvres nues"[2]. Dérive is a period of break where the only guiding destination for inhabitants is to "let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there"[2]. An implementation of this idea was seen in 2004 when an art gallery gave a list of instructions to people who then streamed out into the city and criss-crossed it in a network of mixed routes so as to create a "peripatetic computer". The event, called ".walk", is only one of many examples of this notion of journey and experience rather than destination and necessity-based movement such as getting food or going to work[4].

Situationists in the 1950s went so far as to create a map of Paris that did not represent geographical locations but traced the route of experiences they had with an arrow leading from one experience to the next called "The Naked City"[5]. Amy Elias, a New Literary professor at John Hopkin's University, likens the modern experience of Dérive to surfing the Internet[1]. Much as the surrealists and situationalists acted on impulsive emotional action to navigate the city so too do people drift from website to website, video to video, Wikipedia page to Wikipedia page[1,2]. Contemporarily there is a Terminalia Festival that approaches Dérive using Psychogeography, that explores how the contours of the city make you feel, to create motion through urban environments[2,3]. Most use consciously decided movement, contour lead movement, or lists to assist in their progress rather than an application explicitly designed for such a purpose[2].

For example, an application called "Psychogeography Tool" gives an arrow and a distance. The user follows the arrow for the given distance and is then given another arrow. This application facilitates movement in places where a linear line defines movement from one point to another but does a poor job in urban, grid based, scenarios. On the other hand, Derive exclusively promotes movement in cities and urban environments and provides more obtuse

instructions to promote users to do far more than simply walk around.

2. Methodology

The implementation of Dérive in an Android application consists of equal parts of philosophical education as well as pragmatic programming. Simultaneously fostering organic movement and invoking self expression in individuals as they journey in an urban environment faces two interlaced questions: how is an Android application implementing the idea of Dérive different than just going for a walk around a city, and how does the application push the user outside of their normal movement and experience. To answer these, and the challenges of urging a user towards a journey-oriented movement, Debord's original definition must be evaluated, specifically his emphasis on "varied ambiances"[2].

When a person goes for a stroll through a city there is a distinctive pattern: walk around looking in shops and at structures, explore a couple shops, walk some more, stop for lunch, and so on. Debord's Dérive excludes this typical movement as part of its definition. Randomly walking around is not the goal. Debord, speaking of an attempt at random movement, points out earlier attempts by his contemporaries: "an insufficient awareness of the limitations of chance, and of its inevitably reactionary effects, condemned to a dismal failure the famous aimless wandering attempted in 1923 by four surrealists, beginning from a town chosen by lot: Wandering in open country is naturally depressing, and the interventions of chance are poorer there than anywhere else."[2].

Dérive signifies going to places unvisited but it also signifies visiting the same places in a different manner. Debord states that mental constructs people have learned shape "the image that its inhabitants and those of other neighborhoods have of it" and changing how they think about the city is just as important. The Android application is built around attempting to push this mental shift in its users. To accomplish this paradigm shift, there are two main modes of instructions the application issues to guide the user on their journey: locomotive and evocative. The intent of locomotive instructions is to move the participant around the city in various ways such as "move three blocks forward," "move towards higher ground," and "follow someone in green." Evocative instructions are meant to create a push beyond the normal behavior and allow the users to stretch themselves. With commands such as "move without touching the ground" and "ask an old sage where next to go" users should feel freedom to self discern, to gravitate towards things and ask themselves why they gravitate toward certain things and not others.

However, to push the user further outside of destination-movement into experience-movement, the user requires more than the presentation of the abstract, the user needs to be self-aware and open to interpretation of the experience. The user needs to be distinctly aware of who they are, what they are, and where they are. To encourage this the application allows the user to enter their own title, their own notes about what they did and saw, as well as take photographs to record the experience. If they are encouraged to take pictures of their journey, the hope is the user will have a keen eye for interesting or beautiful things and be gravitated toward them. And even more so, that the user be aware of and reflect upon that interest and gravitational force and, thus, their own context and predispositions.

3. Process

The android application utilizes the model-view-controller (MVC) framework seen in Figure 1.

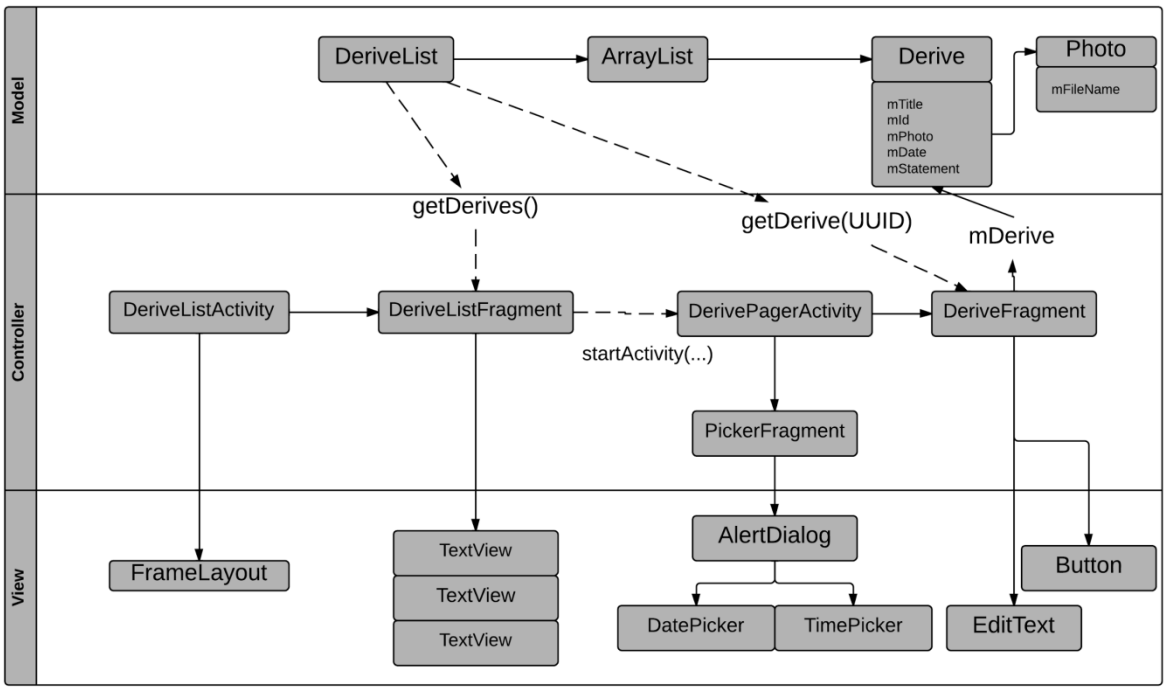

Figure 1. MVC diagram of application.

The Android application is split into three different parts. The model layer houses all of the information that the user uses. It handles the editable titles and notes, the various dates and instructions, as well as saving the information as a JSON file. The controller layer contains all the listeners for user input, so when something is selected or edited, the listeners dictate what information changes and what the user sees as a result of those changes. While the controller and the model are built using Java, the view uses XML to define the layout of the graphical user interface. It presents the data to the user. For example, a button that contains the date or a text field that contains the instruction the user is to follow.

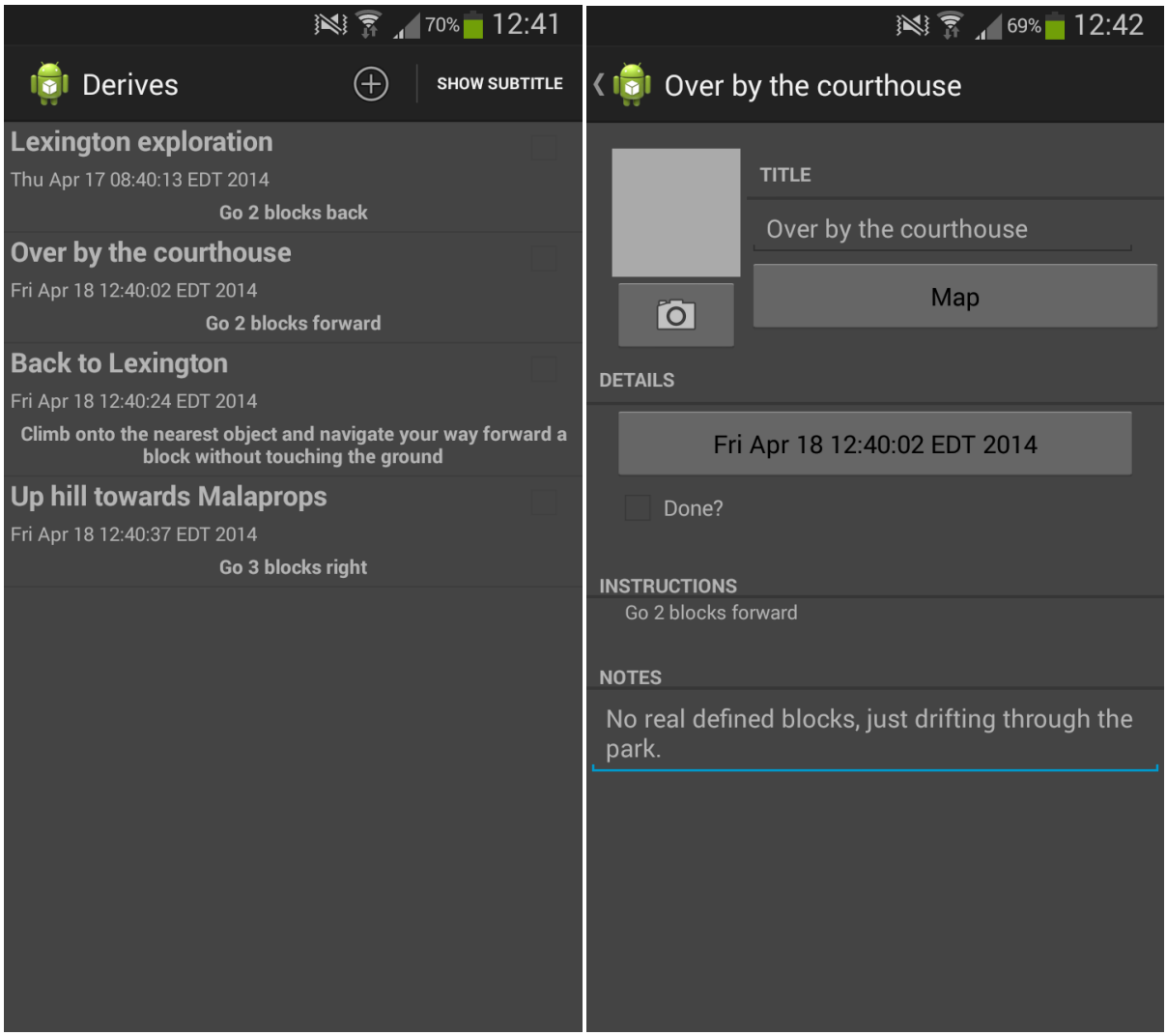

Figure 2. Examples of user interface (UI).

The main view seen on the left (Figure 2) contains a list of fragments that similarly contain within them a list of the various instructions a user has followed. The right view (Figure 2) contains an editable title field. Below that is a map button which inflates an embedded Google Map marked at the current location of the user. Underneath the map button is a customizable date and time button which can be selected to inflate a time and date dialog wheel to change both. The "Done?" check box is used to save the longitude and latitude of the application so when the Map button is pressed again they do not update to a new location. There is an instruction field that indicates the action the user should take and a notes field to remark on anything memorable that happened. The left side of the application features a camera button which can be used to inflate the camera wrapper to capture a picture of the user's surroundings.

The application is developed on both a Windows and Linux computer, as per experience of the developer. GitHub was used for version control and as a means of continuity between the two computers. Android was the target platform because of its open platform and the availability of an Android device, the Samsung Galaxy S3, on which to test. Developing for iOS requires a Macintosh computer, which the developer does not posses. After successful tests on the Galaxy S3, further testing was executed by means of Genymotion. Genymotion provides speed and usability exceeding that of the Android device emulator, and it provides a wealth of prepackaged device setups for testing. The software itself was created using the Android Developer Tools (ADT) Bundle, which includes the Android software development kit (SDK) and the Eclipse integrated development environment (IDE). The Android ADT was chosen for the wealth of online support material. Similar environments such as the Corona or IntelliJIDEA offer free, but limited, versions as well as paid, full fledged versions.

4. Future Development

The application lacks one significant feature: a server side database that can be used to synchronize information across multiple devices. The absence of a server tethers the user to a single device unless they either wish to start over with no previous journeys recorded or to add to someone else's program. Even multiple users of a single device suffer as all their information is congregated together. Having a login system for accounts would provide mobility of devices and users alike; also, it would enable more personalized settings to be incorporated into the application as it develops. However, accounts also provide a barrier to entry even if small. Not everyone wants to take the time to fill out information, nor do they want email updates or to share their name. The end goal is that the experience of the application would outweigh the hesitance over registration.

5. References

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