Nokia researchers show off the mobile experiences of the future

Dean Takahashi | November 20th, 2008

Nokia Research showed off a bunch of next-generation technologies today at its research lab in Palo Alto, Calif. Among the goodies coming our way are real-time traffic updates, phones that can tell us what we're looking at, and devices that morph their forms from watch to tablet to phone as needed.

This show-and-tell comes at an interesting junction in Nokia's history. The Finnish cell phone maker is in the midst of transformation as it begins to focus more on open mobile platforms. Earlier this summer, it bought Symbian and pledged to make its mobile operating system into an open-source platform. It is moving to be more open as a way to fend off competitors such as Google's Android phone software and Apple's iPhone.

Consequently, Nokia has to be more open to collaboration in its research and development afforts, said Henry Tirri, senior vice president and head of Nokia Research, (pictured left) in an interview.

"We're talking about going way beyond just replicating a computer on a phone," he said. "We want to provide the user with the right context that they need at the time when they need

it. This is the evolution of computing, and we can create it through the combination of technologies already in place."

An example of delivering context through open collaboration is a highway traffic demo, Mobile Millennium, which researcher Quinn Jacobson (pictured at top of story) showed off. The project is a collaboration of California's state transportation agency, CalTrans, Nokia's recently purchased Navteq mapping division, and the University of California at Berkeley. Jacobson said that getting real-time traffic data (like what Dash Navigation tried to do) based on location information from drivers is possible with today's technology.

The trafffic data is based on the GPS (global positioning system) navigation chips inside many cell phones, as well as sensor data from CalTrans on major arterials. To protect user privacy, the locations of individual drivers are anonymized and not recorded. On top of that, the data isn't collected in residential districts. What emerges is a map that reveals the green, yellow and red zones of traffic for drivers.

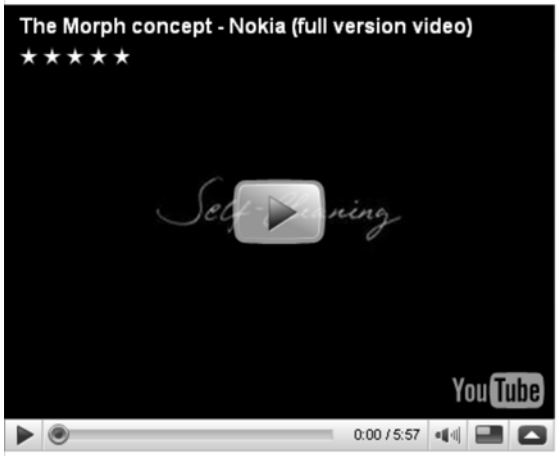
Collaboration is the buzzword on a variety of projects. Nokia has more than 700 researchers at a variety of locations worldwide, including one that was just announced today in Los Angeles. Rebecca Allen, a former University of California at Los Angeles researcher who will lead the lab dubbed Nokia Research Hollywood, said that she will reach out to the entertainment companies in the region to work on mobile entertainment services.

Among the topics of interest is "augmented reality," in which an image seen through a camera-phone display can be augmented with things that aren't there. For instance, you could point your camera at a street in San Francisco and the screen could present you with the view of the same location before the San Francisco earthquake of 1906. A number of companies, including Hewlett Packard and Intel, are looking at creating services or games that can make the real world more entertaining.

Similarly, Nokia's Point and Find project will let you point your camera phone at a building, and it will fetch you information about it. The technology comes from Pixto, a company that Nokia bought in 2007. Philipp Schloter, general manager of the program, says that the technology isn't science fiction. He said that smartphones with cameras have all of the necessary equipment to carry out the identification task. For instance, it's fairly easy to gather data on points of interest for tourists.

Normally, recognizing an image from a photo taken anywhere in the world could take huge amounts of supercomputing power. But with GPS data, the task is much easier because the Point and Find software only has to recognize images that might be on a particular street, Schloter said. The system could go far beyond the data you can get by pointing your phone at a bar code (apps available on the iPhone or Google Android T-Mobile G1). You can point at a hotel sign and get the rates. If you're pointing at a movie poster, your phone could within seconds give you data such as movie play times and plot summaries. Nokia has been working with potential allies, like advertisers who could exploit the Point and Find system by offering coupons to users booking appointments via the software. The public beta for the service is imminent, Schloter said.

The most futuristic project mentioned was Morph, which envisions a day when nanomaterials will be able to refashion themselves. With materials like that, you can build a watch that could change itself into a phone or a tablet computer at a user's whim. Here's the video of Morph.



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