Q&A: Foursquare

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Development Company: Foursquare
Tags: Visual Design; Connectivity; Client App; Workflow
URL: http://foursquare.com

Foursquare is a location-based social networking game that lets users “check-in” at venues and meet up with friends nearby (Foursquare for iPhone is shown in Figure 4–1). The app handily combines everything from Core Location to push notifications, and its ambitions run deep. It aspires to be a multipurpose tool for socializing, complete with Yelp reviews, maps, nearby tweets, and user profiles. Despite its breadth, Foursquare maintains an economically-designed interface that makes the iPhone’s screen feel bigger than it is.

Figure 4–1. Foursquare’s careful tabbed interface packs data into a friendly format.
Dennis Crowley and Naveen Selvadurai are Foursquare’s founders, and built Foursquare for iPhone as a team. Determined to build their app as a standalone tool discrete from Foursquare.com, Crowley and Selvadurai had to navigate not only technical challenges but social consequences, privacy concerns, and new-user foibles. Tempted to explore new UI elements but wary of scaring off new users, the pair has settled on a solid, accessible design after studying some of the iPhone’s UI experimenters—two of whom are featured elsewhere in this book.

Crowley is also the founder of a similar service called Dodgeball, which he and a partner sold to Google in 2005. In addition to its iPhone iteration, Foursquare is available as an Android app and on other phones via an SMS interface.

**What was your plan for Foursquare for iPhone, and how did you divide the work?**

**Dennis:** We knew we wanted to reproduce some of the features of Dodgeball, like the fun-finder stuff. We knew conceptually that we wanted to make a smarter city guide. I don’t think we’ve fleshed out all the conceptual hurdles yet. But we did a lot of paper mockups, sketching things out on paper. Naveen has a pretty good sense for interaction and design, so we just ran with a lot of that stuff; he was building much of the iPhone stuff, and I was building the backend that would talk to the database. My work figured out how [Foursquare] would spit out a bunch of data and he’d find a way to look it pretty on the iPhone.

**Is there a governing aesthetic?**

**Dennis:** We’re trying to make it look different than other apps, and trying to find an aesthetic that we like.

**Naveen:** Having a slightly different look is important to making [Foursquare] a standout among all the other apps in the space. But it’s not just to make it look different; the other factor is that we have so much information to cram on the screen. To show a lot of different types of content, we had to introduce some new styles. You don’t necessarily want to load all that data onto the same screen—even though we probably could’ve done that—so we tried to set different priorities, since people place different weight on different types of information.

For instance, for the user profile: you probably take a look at the badges tab maybe a tenth of the time you do one of the other primary tabs. So we realized it has to be cleanly pushed into some sort of side-loader section.

On the home screen, we decided the Check In button and the Shout button have to be central. Not only does that show you information about yourself, and kind of give you a list of all your friends nearby, but we realized that we needed a direct call to action. Front and foremost is the idea of checking in, because without checking in, you’re not going to get any of the other candy, you’re not going to be able to meet up with your friends, or you’re not going to be able to earn badges, and so on.