

#thismymob: Preserving and Promoting Indigenous Australian Cultural Heritage

Joel Fredericks and Christopher Lawrence

Centre for Indigenous Technology Research and Development
School of Software, Faculty of Engineering and IT
University of Technology Sydney
[joel.fredericks; christopher.lawrence]@uts.edu.au

Abstract. Mobile technologies have become an integral part of daily life in contemporary society thanks to the pervasiveness of smartphones and tablet devices. Over the past 30 years these technologies have evolved beyond their original mandate by permeating diverse social segments across the world. Many cultural heritage projects have adopted mobile technologies to catalogue and document culture and history. However, limited research has examined the potential of using mobile technologies as a mechanism to preserve and promote Indigenous cultural heritage. This work-in-progress paper outlines three distinct areas for the design and development of mobile technologies for Indigenous cultural heritage. We outline these as: (1) Establishing the notion of ‘digital land rights’ which asserts the rights of Indigenous people to a safe online space that they control; (2) Co-designing with a diverse group of Indigenous communities to build meaningful mobile experiences; and, (3) Documenting traditions within their unique context to preserve and promote Indigenous cultural history.

Keywords: Indigenous Australia, Mobile technologies, Digital land rights

1 Introduction

Social and cultural dislocation have been identified as key causes of disadvantage and vulnerability in Indigenous communities [1]. Key factors include the loss of social networks, language barriers, racism, and the sense of not belonging. At the same time, Indigenous communities are rapidly losing their ability to transmit their languages and cultures to a new generation. The enhancement of social connectedness, along with cultural preservation and transmission, has the potential to impact identity, pride, and wellbeing for Indigenous communities within Australia. This suggests that contemporary consumer technologies, such as social networking platforms and smart mobile devices, which are known to support connectedness and storytelling [2], have the potential to enhance Indigenous social connection and to facilitate cultural vitality.

A number of human-computer interaction (HCI) projects around the world have developed and deployed technologies designed to improve conditions in developing cultural heritage within Indigenous communities. However, these projects have

achieved limited success due to a lack of sensitivity and collaboration with Indigenous people by researchers and designers. This limited approach has compounded historical conditions, which have led to contemporary disparities in designing and deploying mobile technologies that have the potential to preserve and promote Indigenous cultural heritage.

In this work-in-progress paper we report on the initial phases of the design and development of a mobile app (#thismymob), which forms part of a wider HCI Indigenous led project in Australia (Indigenous Australians use the colloquial term ‘mob’ to refer to groups of people including nations, communities, family groups, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in general.). We outline the following three distinct areas for the design and development of mobile technologies for Indigenous cultural heritage as: (1) Establishing the notion of ‘digital land rights’ which asserts the rights of Indigenous people to a safe online space that they control; (2) Co-designing with a diverse group of Indigenous communities to build meaningful mobile experiences; and, (3) Documenting traditions within their unique context to preserve and promote Indigenous cultural history. The overall objective of our project is to co-design an app with and for Indigenous Australians in order to: connect young and old people; affirm Indigenous identity; enhance cross-generational connection; and, to enable communities to share and preserve knowledge about traditional cultural practices.

2 Background

Colonial practices have contributed to the disconnection of many Indigenous people from their traditional homelands, cultural ceremonies, diet, and hunting and gathering practices [3]. Yet many Indigenous Australians experience a renewed sense of identity and resilience and a renewed relationship with their cultures and communities through the use of mobile technologies [4]. However, we must be mindful that ‘colonial’ practices, such as racism and segregation are present in modern technologies. At play is an array of digital divides, multiple stakeholders, economic disparities, and more [5]. Existing research suggests that technologies can improve literacy, numeracy, wellbeing and cultural identity for Indigenous Australians [6, 7].

In the current research environment there is no comprehensive study of co-designing technology with Indigenous Australians; nor is there robust evidence that technology has made any meaningful difference to preserving and promoting Indigenous cultural heritage. More work is required to explore the potential for collaborating with Indigenous Australians in the design and development of mobile technologies. Communication barriers are leading factors contributing to poor health outcomes and short life expectancy [8] and these are influenced by poor literacy and numeracy, low social and emotional wellbeing, and poor communication skills. These problems impact employment prospects and quality of life outcomes and are particularly amenable to being addressed by information and communication technologies.

3 #thismob: Enhancing Indigenous cultural identity

Our research project is funded by the Australian Research Council to conduct a national-scale Indigenous-led HCI design project aimed at helping to reconnect Indigenous communities. The rich and complex diversity of Indigenous Australia presents a number of challenges for mobile technologies design and research. In order to capture a diverse perspective, we carefully chose five research sites across urban, regional, rural and remote Australia, that have large Indigenous communities and have significant cultural heritage. Our five research sites and participating ‘mob’s’ are situated in the following locations around Australia (Figure 1): Sydney, New South Wales – Eora and Jumbunna; Portland, Victoria – Gunditjmara; Lombadina, Western Australia - Bard; Bathurst Island, Northern Territory – Tiwi.

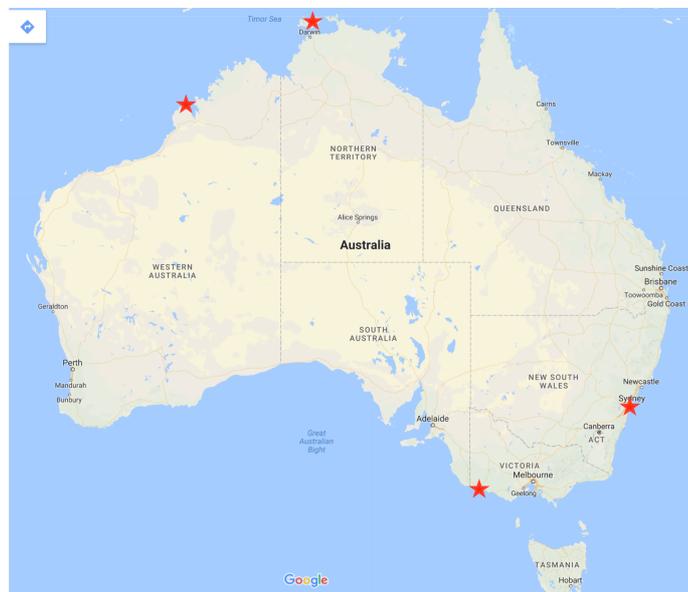


Figure 1: Locations of five research sites (Source: Google 2018)

Our research sites are located on traditional Indigenous lands that are also considered to be significant colonial cultural heritage sites. This contrast between Indigenous and colonial cultural heritage impacts on how Indigenous people are seen; how they are connected to land; and how they practice and preserve traditional cultural activities, which varies across Indigenous communities around Australia. Below we outline three distinct areas that should be incorporated in the design and development of mobile technologies for preserving and promoting Indigenous Australian cultural heritage.

3.1 Digital land rights for Indigenous Australians

The term land rights in Australia refers to the ongoing struggle to gain legal ownership of traditional lands for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Digital land rights further extend this term into the digital space by empowering Indigenous people to take ownership of the design and development of digital technologies. This notion specifically highlights that the digital realm must provide a sense of safety, identity and citizenship.

3.2 Co-designing for diversity

The overall aim of this project was to co-design a mobile app with and for Indigenous Australians. We began this process by collaborating with key Indigenous leaders at each of our research sites who also assisted with the recruitment of Indigenous participants. Design workshops were conducted at each of the research sites in order to: (1) identify the types of digital technologies people used, including social media platforms and software; (2) understand what features people found useful (or not) about these technologies; (3) present ideas about our project, and to obtain feedback around design features for the #thismymob app. The design workshops were successful in generating enthusiastic discussions from all participants. They were also effective in producing rich data around designing a mobile app that could support Indigenous identity, incorporate Indigenous cultures, and translate knowledge and languages that can be used amongst diverse Indigenous end-users.

3.3 Empowering Indigenous culture through a mobile app

Mobile broadband now reaches approximately half of the world's population [9]. Within the Australian context nearly all remote communities have access to mobile phone services, including 4G data speeds. Indigenous people are rapidly adopting mobile technologies as a mechanism to connect with family and the wider Indigenous community [10]. For many Indigenous Australians, social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat have become a normal way to connect with family, friends and peers. However, these platforms are targeted towards networked individualism and do not necessarily work for Indigenous people who are oriented towards a collective approach [11].

Informed by the findings of our design workshops we developed mock-ups of a mobile app for Indigenous social connection and access to Indigenous related information, which we call '#thismymob'. The name is drawn from an idiomatic expression used by Indigenous Australians to assert their identity. The mobile app is still currently being prototyped and will be rolled out in two iterations during 2018 and 2019. The first iteration will incorporate the social connection aspect of the app (Figure 2) that will be rolled out across our five study areas. This will enable the participants to connect with people from within their own community and with people from the other four communities as part of this research project. This provides opportunities to capture and upload cultural stories in the form of text, audio or video recordings; support conversations

around these cultural stories; represent and support social networks of friends and kinship networks (e.g. tribal name, totems, language, kindship); and, store and share cultural images both for story-telling purposes and for commercial purposes.

The second iteration (Figure 3) will incorporate an information portal where user of the #thismymob app can access Indigenous related information and topics. This aspect of the app is to be further explored and will be co-designed with the participants from our five study areas. However, the intention of the information portal is to connect Indigenous communities to resources relevant to health and wellbeing; promote cultural events and political gatherings; provide information around land rights claims; and, create a digital space to support Indigenous entrepreneurship, business ventures, government information, and cultural heritage.

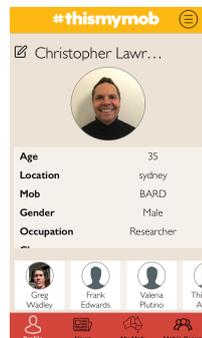


Fig 2. Social aspect of app



Fig 3. Information portal

4 Conclusion

The #thismymob project is unique and the first of its kind to explore the impacts of mobile technologies for preserving and promoting Indigenous Australian cultural heritage across urban, regional, rural and remote landscapes. For over 230 years Indigenous Australians have been colonised, which has caused disconnection from their communities and identity. This work-in-progress paper reports on the initial phases of a national-scale HCI project through three distinct areas. Firstly, it outlines the project aims to design and develop mobile technologies that establish ‘digital land rights’ for Indigenous people. Secondly, it justifies the adoption of a collaborative approach to co-design technologies with Indigenous communities, in order to build meaningful mobile experiences. Thirdly, it highlights the importance to preserve and promote Indigenous cultural heritage that allows Indigenous Australians to reconnect with their communities; share cultural stories; educate the next generation; and, to reaffirm Indigenous cultural identity throughout Australia.

Acknowledgements

We would like to graciously acknowledge the significant contributions from the five Indigenous mobs of Eora, Jumbunna, Bard, Tiwi, and Gunditjmara who have been involved in the design and development of the #thismymob app. We would also like to acknowledge the research team chief investigators of the #thismymob project, Dr Greg Wadley, Associate Professor Tuck Wah Leong and Dr Simon Graham for their invaluable contributions. In addition, we acknowledge the input and contributions from our partner investigators, Professor Nic Bidwell, Professor Paul Dourish and Professor Sandra Eades.

References

1. McMillian, F., Kampers, D., Traynor, V., Dewing, J.: Person-centred care as caring for country: An Indigenous Australian experience. *Dementia: the international journal of social research and practice*. 9, 163–167 (2010).
2. Fredericks, J., Tomitsch, M.: Designing for Self-Representation: Selfies, Engagement and Situated Technologies. In: *Proceedings of the Annual Conference of the Australian Computer-Human Interaction Special Interest Group*. ACM (2017).
3. Lawrence, C.: Influences on food and lifestyle choices for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians: an Aboriginal perspective, www.healthinfonet.ecu.edu.au/key-resources/bibliography/?lid=28895, (2015).
4. Ormond Parker, L., Corn, A., Fforde, C., Obata, K., O’Sullivan, S.: Developed from papers presented at the 2009 AIATSIS National Indigenous Studies Conference and the 2010 symposium Information Technologies and Indigenous Communities. Presented at the (2010).
5. Irani, L., Dourish, P., Kavita, P., Rebecca, E.: Postcolonial Computing: A Lens on Design and Development. In: *Proceedings of the SIGCHI conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. ACM (2010).
6. Edmonds, F., Rachinger, C., Singh, G., Chenhall, R., Arnold, M., de Souza, P., Lowish, P.: What’s ya Story: The making of a digital storytelling mobile app with Aboriginal young people. The University of Melbourne (2014).
7. Edmonds, F., Rachinger, C., Waycott, J., Morrissey, P., Kelada, O.: ‘Keeping Intouchable’: A Community Report on the Use of Mobile Phones and Social Networking by Young Aboriginal People in Victoria. Institute for a Broadband Enabled Society (IBES) University of Melbourne, Melbourne (2012).
8. Cass, A., Lowell, A., Christie, M., Snelling, P., Flack, M., Marnganyin, B., Brown, I.: Sharing the true stories: improving communication between Aboriginal patients and healthcare workers. *The Medical Journal of Australia*. 176, 466–470 (2002).
9. Sanou, B.: The world in 2015. ICT (2015).
10. Shaw, G., Brereton, M., Roe, P.: Mobile phone use in Australian indigenous communities: future pathways for HCI4D. In: *Proceedings of the 26th Australian Computer-Human Interaction Conference on Designing Futures: the Future of Design*. pp. 480–483. ACM (2014).

11. Bidwell, N.: Moving the centre to design social media in rural Africa. *AI and Society*. 31, 51–77 (2016).