Making online connections more personal

By *srlinuxx*
Created *30/07/2005 - 4:11pm*
Submitted by srlinuxx on Saturday 30th of July 2005 04:11:16 PM Filed under [Web](#) [1]

The two Chicago residents lived three blocks from each other, but they had no idea. They were on their PCs, at home, when they figured it out. Today they're dating.

Two childhood buddies, now in their mid-20s, hadn't seen each other since they were students at Wheaton Warrenville South High School. Since "running into" each other while online last month, they are rekindling a friendship.

All four individuals were using an innovative new application called Meetro, which combines instant messaging with your physical location to connect you with others who are nearby.

It's the brainchild of 27-year-old Paul Bragiel, who for the last six years has been running a video game software company called Paragon 5 (www.paragon5.com).

Along with a partner, he started developing Meetro because "we thought it would be cool to use."

The tool, which launched last month, is available as a free download at the Meetro Web site (www.meetro.com). Once opened, Meetro figures out where you are.

But it does not use global positioning technology to do so.

It uses ordinary wireless network, or Wi-Fi, signals.

"It's called triangulation," Bragiel said. "We can figure out where you are based on the Wi-Fi signals around you. You can find out within a couple-hundred-foot radius where the person is located."

Usually, more than one wireless signal is needed for the technology to work, which is typically not a problem in Chicago.

"In the city of Chicago, almost anybody who has a laptop that opens it up around a public place, or in an apartment building where a lot of people have Wi-Fi, we can pick it up," Bragiel said.

In the suburbs, where things are more spread out, users can simply enter their address "so the next time you use Meetro in your house, it will recognize your router and your location. This way, desktop [PC] users can use it as well."

Once Meetro knows where you are, it looks for other people who are using the application nearby.

"It does all the mathematical calculations and determines your general radius. Then the face pane comes up," Bragiel

said. "It shows you all the people who are around you using Meetro and the pictures they put up of themselves."

From there you can click on each person's photo and read their "profile."

"It'll tell you what their favorite books are, where their blog is, and you can also view who their friends are," he said.

Bragiel said it's this last aspect, the one he calls "social networking," that further separates Meetro from anything else that's available.

"You can see how these people are connected to you," he said. "So if Janice down the street is a friend of this person's, and Janice is friends with your friend, you'll know how you're connected to this person. It's the six degrees of separation thing."

You can also exchange instant messages with any of the users who are displayed. Meetro has its own proprietary instant-messaging tool built in ("it's completely encrypted and secure") and also supports AOL and ICQ.

Within a month, support will be added for MSN and Yahoo instant messages.

"You can say, `Hey, what's up, we're really close, let's meet up.' Of course, we have security built in too. You can block anybody if they're being annoying."

To protect the safety of users, exact addresses are never available for others to see. Neither are specific distances between users.

"We only tell people relative distances, like you're within a quarter-mile or a half-mile," Bragiel said.

Further, Bragiel suggests you use the same precautions on Meetro as you would on any other online community: use extreme caution before revealing your real name (use a nickname or code name instead), your address or any other personal information.

As for photos, the security conscious can use a cartoon or even a photo of a pet.

There are about 2,000 Meetro users, with more than half in the Chicago area.

Although Meetro hasn't made any money yet, Bragiel has big plans.

He hopes to license the tool to conference organizers to help attendees meet one another. And he believes many Web sites can benefit from the kind of location-based services Meetro provides.

"It's an alternative GPS," he said.

"Imagine opening up ESPN.com and immediately being localized to the Chicago, or Japan, version of the site."

By ALEX L. GOLDFAYN
Chicago Tribune [2]

Web