Exploring the interest in the use of mobile devices in a gardening context

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ABSTRACT

This status-report, formatted as a paper, presents the work I constructed as a visiting research student in the Interactions Design Group (IDG) – Department of Information Systems (DIS), University of Melbourne, Australia. This project revolves around exploring different ways of giving advice to gardeners as to what will be the most credible way of changing their watering schedule and allowing them to become more conscious about their water consumption in their private gardens.

A case study involving 10 participants is conducted including interviews before and after the case study. In the case study, the participants tested an early prototype of mobile software for smartphones called SGW Advisor. The prototype shows great potential of becoming a good solution for gardeners as a tool for their gardening practices. The paper ends with a plan for my master's thesis, where the data from the case study will be analysed.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I describe my stay as a Visiting Research Student in the Department of Information Systems at the University of Melbourne (UM) in the period of July 20th to November 20th 2010. This includes the work I have done, considerations and thoughts I had during the process. The work presented in this paper is going to be a part of my subsequent master's thesis.

During my stay in DIS, I was associated with the research project Smart Garden Watering (SGW), funded by the 2006 Smart Water Fund (Vic)[13]

The aim of this research is twofold: (1) to gain an understanding of how technology can help gardeners to use water more wisely in their gardens [8], and (2) how social networking technologies can be used to build a community of people talking about their watering strategies and share their gardening interests online [9].

The objective for my stay at UM and my involvement in the Smart Water project was (1) to get an idea on how research is carried out in a grant-based project, (2) to find a point of interest and a central research question for my master's thesis, somehow related to the Smart Water project and (3) to, if possible, contribute with my skills and knowledge to the Smart Water project. This paper begins with a short description of the related work, mainly focussed on the work of the Smart Water project prior to my arrival, and during my stay.

This is then followed by a discussion about scoping a project for my master's thesis grounded on the Smart Water project. It then describes how I got an understanding of the domain I was working in, and the preparation of the case study that was conducted in the project.

The first interview is described, followed by an explanation of how the actual case study was developed. Subsequently, a description of how the second interview with participants is then described. Finally, the paper ends with an explanation of the future work of the project.

The paper is written in true order in which the events happened, during my four-month stay at UM.



Figure 1 - Picture of SGW Advisor mobile website running on iPhone 4 & HTC Legend

RELATED WORK

The Smart Water project is funded to run from 2006-2010 [14] and several papers has already been published based on this research. Among these are two central articles, which together illustrate the diversity of the Smart Water project.

The first paper is titled "SmartGardenWatering: Experiences of using a garden watering simulation"[8]. In this paper, the authors first investigate how novice and expert gardeners responded to advices from computer software [11]. They investigated whether the gardeners readily accepted the software, or whether they override the software with their own local knowledge.

The research conducted a study of 20 gardeners using the software in a period of one week. The focus was to identify factors that show to what extent a designed software influences ongoing gardening practice. The findings from the study revolve around the types of factors that brought confidence or lack of trust in the underlying horticultural model and its application to a particular garden. The findings from the software.

The second paper is titled "Living on the Hedge: SmartWatering in the community" [9]. The paper builds on the existing study of making an online simulation to advise gardeners on how to water their garden. The paper describes how the authors redesigned the existing software and incorporated social networking features. Furthermore, the important issues that they have identified related to the use of social networking to cause change, in a sustainability context.

The authors concluded their paper with the discussion of several research questions that needed to be addressed. One research question to be answered was the impact that the usage of the software has on water use. Whether there is a disconnection (or connection) from sitting at a computer to the actual practice in the garden.

This leads to another research question that must be addressed. The interest in the use of mobile devices in the gardening context; what information could be pushed to a gardener's mobile Smartphone that would be useful? Watering reminders, or alerts to skip a scheduled watering due to recent weather events?

The last and most abstract research question is the issue of scale was whether the software is designed for individual gardeners rather than groups, who might share the same interest in communicating and collaborating online about a common 'good' to save water.

SCOPING A PROJECT

The two papers presented in the previous section illustrate the project status, when I arrived at UM. I had to find my role in the Smart Water project, and decide what the topic of my master's thesis generally would be. I looked at the described research questions from the second paper [9], and found the issue scaling from a system to individuals into groups to be too abstract for a project in a period of 4 months. I was more interested in the two other research questions that could be explored.

I could either scope a project exploring the disconnection between gardeners sitting with a desktop-system compared to the actual practice in the garden, or scope a project around exploring the interests in the use of mobile devices in the gardening context. I quickly decided to choose the second approach and thus, scope a project exploring the interest in the use of mobile devices in a gardening context.

After having scoped the project, the next few sections describe the different phases I have been through in my project at my stay at UM.

DOMAIN UNDERSTANDING

I arrived to Melbourne on July 19^{th} . I visited the university for the first time on July 20^{th} , where I received an introduction to the department. I arranged my first meeting with my Australian supervisor Dr. Jon Pearce (Jon) on July 22^{nd} .

At this meeting with my supervisor, we discussed my interest in the project, and how my interest could fit into the Smart Water project. I rapidly decided that my topic in my project would be about the use of mobile device in a gardening context. He asked me to hold a seminar in the IDG [2], as it could be a good starting point for the project. The main goal with the seminar was (a) to introduce me to the other researchers in the IDG and (b) to hold a discussion about the different topics that could be the focus in my project.

My personal goal with my stay at UM was to contribute to an existing research project, which was strongly linked to the Smart Water project. However, at the same time it also had to be groundwork for my master's thesis. Therefore, my interest in holding this seminar was very high. From holding the seminar I found it very useful, as I was able get other researcher's opinions on my project. I also found it as a good learning-process in presenting in front of people, all with the interest in interaction design. The seminar was held on August 6th. Leading up to the seminar, I began to prepare myself by reading relevant literature that was related to my project.

Seminar

16 people attended the seminar, which was held for approximately one hour. My supervisor Jon used the first ten minutes as an introduction to the existing project and where it was heading. In the remaining 50 minutes, I delivered my presentation, which I decided to divide into two parts.

In the first part of my presentation I introduced myself to the IDG and my interest in the project. In the second part, I gave the participants a few exercises to do including paperwork they had to fill out on their own, see Figure 2. After finishing the exercises, we had a discussion in plenum, about the different areas I could focus on in my project. I found the seminar very useful, in the way of finding a research question for the project.



Figure 2 - Participants in the seminar filling out paperwork given in the seminar.

I used the first week after the seminar to analyse the data that I got from the paperwork the participants in the IDG filled out. In the same week, I had a meeting with Jon where we held a brainstorming session. Numerous of new ideas and issues were discussed. We then planned a workshop session with the members of the Smart Water research project team. The workshop was planned to be on August 23rd. Before the workshop, my task was to find a way to visualize my ideas in my project, and also a way to discuss the issues in the project.

Workshop

The workshop was held on August 23rd, which went for a length of 1 hour and thirty minutes. All members from the Smart Water research project team attended the workshop.

I divided the workshop into two parts. The first part of the workshop was an introduction to an illustrative map over how the system eventually could be like. A mock-up of the different screen pictures was shown, with connection lines to the different functions and pages in the system. The map was discussed in detail with comments and ideas to some changes. The map is shown on Figure 4.



Figure 4 – Illustrative map of the system

In the second part of the workshop, I presented three different issues I wanted the members in small groups of two to discuss which later the issues where discussed in plenum.

The first and biggest issue raised was that I would not be able to test the prototype during summer (Dec-Feb), because of my time at the UM would finish by the end of November. Therefore, I had to find a solution to be as realistic as possible to the actual watering practice. After some good discussions the team and I decided to test the prototype in a case study, where the participants in a period of three weeks had to use the system. While the case study was running they would also have to look after a plant, like if they had to look after their garden. They would be given a watering schedule, which they had to follow during the three weeks. After having discussed how the software should be tested in detail, the next issue that came up was the issue with the different sources of information that the system gives the users in form of advices during the case study. The three different information sources were information from a local weather station, a weather expert and information from what other gardeners in the community was doing.



Figure 3 - Timeline for the project

The question that the members discussed was whether they thought it would be best to only give one source of information to the participants in the case study, or to give the participants all the three different sources of information during the case study period.

After a long discussion we decided to give the participants all the three different sources of information during the case study. Later an interview would be held with each participant in the case study where each individual type of advice will be discussed in detail.

The last issue the members had to discuss was the method of finding participants for the case study and what type of participants should participate in the case study? The members quickly discussed and decided that it would be best to get a various mix of gardeners from different age groups. Since the case study was a qualitative study and the outcome is rich data from interviews and observations, I came to the conclusion 8-10 participants for the study was enough. After having discussed the three issues with the members of the Smart Water project, the workshop came to an end.

I found the workshop very useful, as the discussion was very useful for the process of my project. I addressed the issues I found difficult to decide by myself, and I was now able to move further in my project. After the workshop ended I had another meeting with Jon, where we discussed the timeline for my project. The timeline for my project can be seen on Figure 3. He found my timeline reasonable according to the time I had left in Melbourne.

Research question

After several meetings with my supervisor and discussions with members from research team, I finally found my research question for my study; to explore the interest in the use of mobile device in a gardening context and furthermore explore what role of the actual source of information plays in persuading people to be conscious about their water use.

PREPARING A CASE STUDY

According to the timeline on Figure 3, I had only three weeks to prepare my case study. This included finding participants for my study, design and build a working prototype, buying equipment for the case study while also getting the ethics application approved by DIS.

Different approach

One of the things I realized after arriving to UM were how things were done, compared to the way it is done at Aalborg University (AAU) in Denmark. For example, as part of my study I needed to setup a Skype and FTPconnection. I had to ask my supervisor to fill out a form, which had to be approved by the technical staff at UM and also the head of the administration in DIS before the ports could be open. If I had the same problems back at AAU in Denmark, the process would be to go straight to the technical staff and get the problem solved, rather than involve my supervisor and the head of administration as in Melbourne.

Ethics approval

To gather participants for the case study I was preparing, I had to be approved by an ethics committee in DIS.

There was already an ethics approval involved in the earlier Smart Garden Watering project¹. However at the time I was not listed as an investigator. Now the platform was changed from a system on a PC to a system on a mobile device, which I had to make an amendment to the existing ethics approval.

The amendment had to consist of an amendment letter, where the changes in the already existing ethics approval had to be expressed. I also had to include a new plain language statement, a participant consent form, an advert to find participants and a list of all the topics I wanted to discuss with the participants during the interviews I wanted to conduct.

It was my first time writing an ethics application, and I felt I learned quite a bit by doing this. It made me more focused on what and how I wanted to structure my case study and interviews. It also made me more conscious of the ethical problems that could occur, while having people participating in a research study.

I received the ethics amendment application approved by the head of the ethics committee to weeks before deadline, which meant that I was able to conduct interviews and start advertising for finding participants for my study [1].

Finding participants

I had quite a few problems in finding participants for my case study. The participants I needed for my case study had to be people with gardens and have a mobile device that was able to browse the Internet.

I started contacting online gardening communities in Melbourne and posted my advertisement on their forums, but was out of luck. I also tried to call gardening nurseries in Melbourne, and I asked them to help me find participants for my study – also without any luck. My supervisor Jon tried to use his network and he then contacted a friend of his who ran a gardening course at Burnley Campus – a part of UM. He was able to get me an appointment with a gardening class, where I went and presented my project in their break-time.

¹ Ethics ID: 0931246

I luckily found 8 participants who were more than happy to participate in my case study. However, I still needed more participants in my case study.

Since I arrived to Melbourne, I was active with the Danish society called Young Vikings [15] in the city. I tried to find more participants for my case study there. Through the society, I recruited the last two participants in my case study, both with a garden and with a mobile device that could browse the Internet. After finding participants for my case study and arranging the first interview with them, I could now start finding the equipment for running the case study.

Equipment

For the case study I needed an audio-recorder to record my interviews with the participants. I borrowed one from the department. In one of our weekly meetings with the Smart Water research team, we decided which plant could be useful to give to the participants in the case study. I then went to a large store called Bunning's Warehouse, where I bought plant-seedlings, potty mix and 10 pots.

The plant given to the participants in my study was the green-peas plant. We chose this plant as I was told in the Smart Water research team meeting and from the warehouse that this plant was fast-growing in a period of 2-3 weeks. I bought the equipment the day before my first interview, which was held on September 13th.

I planted the small plant-seedlings and potty mix in the 10 pots. It was an exciting approach, because I never had the experience of planting plants before. For planting the plants in the right way, I received some help from friends. A picture of the process of planting the plants in the pots is shown on Figure 5.



Figure 5 - The planting of the peas-plant in pots

Building prototype

Since finding participants, purchasing equipment and getting the ethics amendment approved by the ethics committee was completed, I was able to start building a prototype that I wanted to be tested in the case study. From the workshop August 23rd, I had nearly a month to finish my prototype.

The aim was to make a mobile application that could run on every smart phone, but my focus was to make a mobile website that could run mainly on an Apple iPhone or a HTC Android phone. I never had the experience in creating applications or websites for mobile devices, so it was a very challenging to build a website for a mobile device. I found an open source webkit [3] with a framework to build websites for mobile devices, and I used it as a starting point for my system. The prototype was then designed in PHP while I used a PHP MySQL database to store the data in. I looked at the issues which were written in the second paper which included the interest of the use of mobile devices in gardening contexts; What information that could be sent to a gardener's mobile device which could be useful.

To answer this question and to build this into the prototype, I read the feedback-report written on the back of Smart Garden Watering project version 1.0 by Bjorn Nansen - May 2009 [5] In the report it was written that most of the participants from the study were interested in real time weather information from the Bureau Of Meteorology (BOM). They also mentioned that they had an interest in getting information regarding when to water and when not to water according to the watering restrictions in Melbourne.

Using the results in that report, I decided to make a mobile application that had the features that answer these issues built into the system. However, the main solution still had to have an advising-service that would alert the participants of when there were changes in the normal watering schedule.



Figure 6 – Early version of the home-screen (Dashboard) in the system

Figure 6 shows an early screenshot of the home screen, which is also called the "Dashboard" in the system. It has four menu buttons, which navigates the user to real-time weather information, the watering schedule, an advising service and daily input.

In the left upper corner is a button that logs the user out of the system and in the right upper corner is a button that navigates the user to their profile information.

The prototype was done the week before the interviews were conducted and tested on different smart-phones of fellow research-students in DIS.

Water restrictions

During the development of the prototype, the water restrictions from Melbourne Water [4] changed from stage 3 to stage 2 water restrictions by September 1^{st.} This was due to the fact of the heavy rain in the last couple of months in the Melbourne area. Hence, for the households in Melbourne it meant that they now were able to water two times a day (morning, 6-8 AM and evening 8-10PM) rather than the previous manner of watering only once a day.

According to my project this meant that I had to reprogram the scheduling section in the system because of new watering times of the water-restrictions.

An example of the watering schedule according to the stage 2 restrictions, which appeared in a day of the case study, is shown on Figure 7.



Figure 7 - Watering Schedule 28.09.2010

1ST INTERVIEW

The first interviews with my participants in the case study took place in their own homes between September 13th and September 19th.

The visit started with a tour of their garden where the participants gave a small talk about their gardening practice and their tools they used for gardening.

After the tour of their garden an introduction to the case study was given. The participants signed the participant consent form, received a plain language statement, a watering schedule and also a manual to use the prototype [9].

A picture of the SGW manual they were given is shown on Figure 8.



Figure 8 - SGW Manual with an iPhone 4 running the prototype

After the introduction, the plant was given to the participant. Some of the participants chose to plant it in their garden, rather than having it in the given pot (see Figure 9).



Figure 9 – The given plant, planted in a participant's garden

An interview was conducted with the participants. In this interview, questions regarding their current watering practices and the use of IT-devices were discussed. The interviews were recorded with their permission, which went for approximately 20 minutes. After each visit, I transcribed the interview from an audio file to a text file, which made it easier to access the data, for later analysis.

CASE STUDY

The case study started September 20th and finished by October 10th. The participants got their login-information via email on September 19th. Thus, they could start using the system from September 20th, the day they had to water their plant for the first time according to their watering schedule they have been given. On Figure 10, is illustrated a part of the watering schedule, which was given to the participants.

WATERING SCHEDULE

Date	Schedule	Time
20. Sep	Watering Day	6•8 AM AND 8•10 PM
21. Sep		
22. Sep	Watering Day	6•8 AM AND 8•10 PM
23. Sep		
24. Sep	Watering Day	6•8 ам AND 8•10 рм
25. Sep		
26. S	ī	

Figure 10 - A part of the watering schedule given to the participants during the case study.

Each day, the participant had to use the system and feed information into the system stating whether they have been watering their garden the current day or not.

Within the 3 weeks the case study was running, the system sent different types of advice to the participant's Advisor Inbox – See Figure 11.



Figure 11 - 1 unread message in inbox

To notify the participants that they received a message in the SGW system they were also receiving a SMS from the sender-ID: "SGW Advisor". For this an online solution called SMSGlobal [12] was used to send SMS-messages to the participants.

An example of a message sent out to the participants when they received a message in the SGW system is shown on Figure 12.



Figure 12 – An example of a SMS message sent out to one of the participants

On each day they received a message, the participants had to make a judgement whether they wanted to listen to the message and change their watering schedule, or keep following the given watering schedule.

For each message they received, they had to rate how useful they thought the advice was. The participant's decision whether to agree or disagree with the received advice and the rating of them was saved in a database for later analysis.

An example on a message that the participants received in the case study is shown on Figure 13.



Figure 13 – Recent Rainfall message

During the case study all actions made by the participants and their interaction with the system was recorded and logged in the database.

The database system logged when the participant logged into the system and also recorded all their actions they made before logging out of the system again. The time the participants were using the system did vary day by day.

An	example	on	a log	from	of	participant	number	7	is
sho	wn on Fig	gure	14.						

LogID	m_id	login	description	date_time
1434	27	P#7	/logout.php	27-09-2010 11:19:30
1433	27	P#7	/member- index.php	27-09-2010 10:52:22
1432	27	P#7	/gather- success.php	27-09-2010 10:52:18
1431	27	P#7	/gather- exec.php	27-09-2010 10:52:18
1430	27	P#7	/gather- form.php	27-09-2010 10:52:13
1429	27	P#7	/member- index.php	27-09-2010 10:52:11
1428	27	P#7	/sgw.php	27-09-2010 10:52:09
1427	27	P#7	/read_messag e.php?messag eid=116	27-09-2010 10:51:57
1426	27	P#7	/sgw.php	27-09-2010 10:51:55
1425	27	P#7	/member- index.php	27-09-2010 10:51:44
1424	27	P#7	/schedule.php	27-09-2010 10:51:19
1423	27	P#7	/member- index.php	27-09-2010 10:51:11
1422	27	P#7	/login- exec.php	27-09-2010 10:51:11

Figure 14 - Log for participant # 7 (27.09.2010)

On Figure 14 it is shown that participant #7, logged into the system 10:51:11 and used the system for 28 minutes, before s/he logged out 11:19:30. In the 28 minutes, the participant had checked the watering schedule, read a message, which s/he received in the advisor inbox, and made a judgement based on the given advice. Then s/he fed information into the system whether s/he had been watering her plant or not that current day.

After the case study was conducted a second interview was planned with each of the participants in the case study.

2ND INTERVIEW

The second interview with the participants was conducted between October 11th and October 18th.

The agenda for the second interview with each participant in the case study was to first look at the peas-plant they had been given and the growth of it since the case study began. A picture of the grown plant was taken, before conducting the second interview with the participant – See picture of a participant's plant on Figure 15.



Figure 15 - A picture of a participant's plant

The questions the participant were given in the second interview focused on the sources of information the participants received in form of messages during the case study. Each different message received in the case study was discussed and the extent of the usefulness of each message. After discussing all the different varieties of messages that were given during the case study, the participants were given key cards of each of the different types of messages. They had to list the key cards in the order in which they found the most credible/trustful way of changing their water-use behaviour. A picture of the key cards is shown on Figure 16.



Figure 16 - Given key-cards in second interview

Furthermore questions around using a mobile device as a tool in the gardening practise were discussed. The participants were then asked to discuss the actual case study. They were asked their reflection on whether the system and the advices given on whether to skip or add water to their schedule make them become more conscious about their use of water in their gardens. At the end of the interview they were asked to raise any issues regarding the system, which could be modified to make the system more powerful.

CONCLUSION

I can now reflect on my stay at UM by answering the list of objectives presented in the introduction.

First of all, the stay in Melbourne has given me an indepth knowledge about how research is done and can be carried out in a grant-based research project.

Second of all, I have found an interest for my master's thesis, and third of all, the work I have done can be used

both for my own master's thesis and for the Smart Water research project as well.

During this process I realized how challenging it is to scope a master's thesis around an existing research project, so the work that has been done can be used in both places.

When I look back on the 4 months at UM, I think of the stay being a very challenging but a great learning experience. I think I have been successful and feel like I have developed a prototype including a plan for future work that shows great potential in making applications for gardeners to become wiser about their water consumption. I feel that I have gained maximum advantage of my stay at DIS, UM.

FUTURE WORK

After having finished all the interviews and having transcribed all the files from audio-files to text-files, the next step is to analyse the data from the interviews with the data which the participants entered into the database using the SGW Advisor application, during the case study.

The analysis will be conducted using a grounded theory approach, where I will look at the transcripts from the interview and try to categorize them in different phenomena. From having different phenomena I would try to generate themes that hopefully would be able to answer my research question, which was "*To explore the interest in the use of mobile device in a gardening context and furthermore explore what role of the actual source of information plays in persuading people to be conscious about their water use.*"

I am planning to let my master's thesis consist of two papers. The first paper is planned to contain the work I presented in this paper together with a presentation of the of the analysis I got from my case study. My aim and hope is to get the paper published to the OzCHI 2011 conference or NordiCHI 2012 [7][6].

The second paper I will conduct in my master's thesis, which will be following another case study conducted in Denmark. The second case study will focus on electrical consumption of students living in collegiums in Denmark. The results I received from the first case study in Melbourne will be used as a starting point in this new case study.

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