Pool at the Curry Student Center

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Abstract

This paper presents aspects of a study on how students of the Northeastern University of Boston use the Curry Student Center. The study examined student’s behaviour at the time of asking to play pool. We focus on the interaction between the assistant and the students, the artifacts involved and the technology they use. To conclude we offer some ideas to improve this experience and make it more efficient and friendly.

1 Introduction

The Curry Student Center provides plenty of room and services to students at Northeastern. These range from food and drinks to a shop or a lounge and pool tables. This study focuses on the interaction of people in the pool tables area. Pool is a popular game amongst students and satisfying the demand in peak hours is challenging. The technology they use for this is simple and effective. Would it be better if modern technology was involved? Maybe keeping things simple and tangible, as explained further in this document, is a better solution.

This paper offer first an overview of the activity object of this study, the artifacts involved and a description of the people involved. After this, a summary of two interviews conducted with relevant subjects and a detailed explanation of the activity.

To conclude we

2 Overview

2.1 Booking a Pool Table

The pool tables are located in a room next to a large lounge. They are easy to find and students tell each other about it. They show up in small groups (3-4 individuals) most often; it is also frequent to arrive in pairs but hardly ever alone. Some meet other fellow students in the lounge while they work and propose to play for a while. Whereas the pool area is for leisure, the lounge space is shared between people who study and people who simply sit and talk, sometimes with take-away coffee from nearby eateries.

The pool tables are in the same room as a Nintendo Wii, a TV and a Sony PS3 and, in general, are always busy. The procedure to play is simple: a student gives his Husky ID to an assistant and gets, in return, a device that will inform him when the table is free. They can then get the cues and other tools to play. After 60 minutes at most they have to release the table and the designated student gets his or her Husky ID back.

2.2 Artifacts

There are two key artifacts involved in the process of booking a pool table. The student exchanges his or her Husky ID card for a notifier. Other objects involved are a folder specially designed to store Husky cards and a computer with a custom simple software.

The notifier is a device the size of most users’ hand, lightweight, that works on the 475Mhz band to communicate with the computer in the leisure area. It is in range in most parts of the building so students can move around, grab a coffee in nearby eateries and still be notified when the table is free. The device keeps a green LED flashing to indicate waiting and turns red and vibrates when the table is free.

Figure 1: Husky ID Card
2.3 People

Most pool players are male, 18 to 21 years old and Asian or American. They are in groups of 4 friends or in pairs. Sometimes they interact with people in other pool tables but they often stick together in a closed group of friends.

3 Interviews

As part of the field study two individuals were interviewed. It is an unstructured interview designed to know more about the people in the room, their motivations and their perception of the current system.

3.1 Interviewing an assistant

The first subject is male, 20, employed by the university responsible for organizing the leisure area. He explained the procedure to get a pool table, the tools to play and how to release the table. Asked about past conflicts with devices, he said that one of the notifiers was stolen. These devices are known to be extremely reliable and are used so much that they charge their batteries periodically. He also pointed out activities that students do while they wait: they play ping pong, watch TV or hang out in the lounge. During this short interview, two groups of people asked to play pool.

3.2 Interviewing a student

The second subject is a student who was playing pool, 19, asian. He explained how he got the table and how he heard about the place. Because there is no way to book the table on-line, he plays ping-pong while he waits. Normally they have to wait 15 minutes approximately. He finds the notifier extremely useful and can’t see any usability issues in it. He was asked about the convenience of the place compared to a bar downtown to understand why it is so popular and how busy it can get. The Curry Student Center is easy to reach and makes it easy to know fellow students. However, they also enjoy going out to bars. He points out: We’re normally two or four to play here, because it’s convenient. Then one of us gets that device.

4 The Activity

One student goes to the counter and asks the assistant how long it will take to get a pool table. If the answer seems a reasonable waiting time, the student gives his Husky ID Card to the assistant and gets the device. The student can now go somewhere else with his or her friends and is responsible for telling everybody when the device turns red. When the time is over for a table, the assistant tells the players to wrap up. Then the one that got the notifier can get his or her Husky ID Card back. The assistant sends the notification to the students that are waiting. The notifier turns red and the students go back to the pool area. The assistant tells them what table they can go.

5 Conclusions

This research has shown how simple technology can solve a simple need. Users might prefer tangible objects rather than their smartphones to get notifications because it seems more intuitive and a natural evolution of a paper ticket system. Functional requirements of the computer system for the assistant are quite limited and, whereas a better UI might help learning, it would not be solving a need. Other ways to notify users that a table is free might include TV screens that can display other messages, a website, native Android, iOS and Blackberry apps, etc. However, none of them would improve visibility, accessibility or energy saving, critical aspects in this system. Users want immediate feedback to know when to go back to the leisure area.