UBER ALLES

LOCATION TECHNOLOGY HAS FOUND ITS MAINSTREAM MOMENT IN THE UBIQUITOUS CAB-HIRE APP, SAYS ALISTAIR MACLENAN

Two days before Christmas in the UK, I got to London's Waterloo station just in time to watch the last train for the night (well, morning, if I am honest) slip out into the darkness. The last thing I saw as it rounded a bend was the name of my home town illuminated in the rear window.

I had had a night out with clients and must admit that I was slightly the worse for wear. But it is remarkable how quickly you can come to your senses when faced with a possible £200 (US$290) taxi ride, a frantic effort to find a hotel or a night on a park bench.

I took out my phone to write what would need to be an extremely delicately worded text message home when I remembered that earlier in the evening, the conversation had touched on the taxi app, Uber.

Well, here was a field test if ever there was one. As I was being shooed out of the station, I clicked to download Uber's app and in a matter of minutes the silver U logo on a black background was blinking at me. In truth, I may have been the one blinking.

Bleary-eyed, I managed to enter my credit card details into the app by the light of a fast food caravan. I peered at the Google Map that then filled my phone's screen. I could see quite clearly my location displayed accurately enough to order a hamburger from the caravan. My next step was to tell the app where I wanted to go.

With my home postcode entered, I waited less than three minutes for my driver to appear. I watched his progress on my screen, only glancing up when he was 10m away. Forty minutes and £35 (US$50) later, I wrestled my front door open. As I did so, I couldn't help but offer a small note of thanks to Uber – and given the company's success, it would appear I am not alone.

I subsequently found out that my problems that night mirrored those of Garret Camp, a man who had been stranded many times in his home town. During a trip to Paris, France, in 2008, Camp and his companion Travis Kalanick drank and talked late into the night about the best way to solve this problem.

The slightly strange answer they came up with was to design a limousine time-share app. But however unlikely this conception, a two-year incubation saw the birth of UberCab and its development into a more recognisable 'standard' taxi application.

'Traditional' taxi companies have a central point of contact for customers whose rides are then distributed by the controller amongst the drivers who work for that company. The controller makes the decision as to who is the most appropriate driver to send – a decision that may not always be based on what provides the best service for the customer.

Uber does away with just about all of that. Now instead of hoping a cab would drive by and stop or that they were in the catchment area of a cab firm, passengers could bring the drivers to them. Except they weren't 'taxi drivers'. They were self-employed people in their own cars who happened to have sufficient on-board mapping technology to find both the customer and their destinations, and hence fulfil the role of a taxi driver.

It is this distinction that has made Uber so successful and so controversial at the same time. Many European and US cities have attempted to ban Uber to protect the established workforce, but you may as well ban people from using the Internet!

With Uber, location technology and its use by the general public has found its mainstream moment. Its first trial took place in New York City in the US in January 2010 with just three cars; it now has more than 160,000 drivers working in more than 300 cities in 60 countries around the world, providing a million rides a day to its eight million-strong user-base. Geospatial technology has crossed the chasm from business to consumer. Google Maps and GPS are the foundations but they are tools, not applications. Uber performs a specific task based completely on the location of supplier and consumer.

Location has arrived (if you'll excuse the pun). Not 'could be useful', like mobile marketing, location has fundamentally changed how people move about, make money and interact with companies. What will be next?

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