Group Report

This document is a report of the user research conducted by **Scott Abromowitz**, **Panagis Papadatos**, **Tansy Peplau** and **Kevin Vigneault** for educational purposes related to the INFM605 class, taught by Professor Vedat Diker, during the Fall 2011 Semester.

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Structure of the report

First, we are presenting the product that we selected to perform user research for. Second, after a short summary and description of the procedure that we followed we present specific information (facts and research results) related to different elements of Gowalla such as stories,

lists and guides. Next, we present information related to gamification (the game elements integrated into Gowalla). Last, we will talk about the procedure and methodology that we followed, along with lessons that we learned and suggestions for future implementations of Gowalla.

The Product

The product that we chose to perform user research for is called Gowalla. Gowalla is a location-based social network smartphone application that allows users to 'check in' to different locations (report their location). It can be used as a private documenting tool or as a social application, since it allows users to have friends and share their information with them. Shortly before our research begun, Gowalla underwent a lot of major changes that removed many of the game-like features that made Gowalla very popular.

The Goal

The goal of this research is to find out what our users think of Gowalla, how they use it, how satisfied they are, how usable the interface is, who they are. However, the most important goal is to assess how the recent changes affected the usage and usability of the application.

The procedure

In order to get different kinds of data, we applied four different kinds of user research methods, each different kind applied by a member of our group. Scott Abromowitz performed usability testing, Panagis Papadatos performed surveys, Tansy Peplau performed interviews and Kevin Vigneault performed Contextual Inquiry. The variety of data is crucial to the completeness of the

research, since it provides different perspectives and viewpoints, allowing us to have a holistic view on the product and its users. After the data was collected, the results from each individual method were compared and analyzed in order to reach final conclusions about not only the strengths, weaknesses and potential improvements on Gowalla, but also the aplication of the methods themselves and the lessons learned. Observing the user experience [Kuniavsky, 2003] was used as a reference and a guide during the whole procedure.

Strengths, Weaknesses and Improvements

After conducting the four different kinds of user research, we analyzed and compared our results and observed that they were converging into the same strengths, weaknesses and converged at the same improvements. This is fortunate, since it increases the validity of the facts and suggests that the methods were applied in an appropriate manner.

Strengths

Throughout all the different methods that we used, Gowalla's most prominent strength seems to be the loyalty of its users, especially since most users mentioned that it is the only application of its kind that they use. Furthermore, they all seemed to be very passionate about their opinions and these strong feelings imply that when they were satisfied (since they are currently clearly not), they were very loyal. Users also seemed to agree that the aesthetics of the design were of high quality, since this was mentioned a lot. More specifically, some users stated that the design was the most important reason they were using Gowalla and not the competitor products. Finally, the interface seems to also be a strength, as the Usability Testing failed to find major usability problems and it did not really come up in the rest of the methods

Weaknesses

The weaknesses of Gowalla seem to all be orbiting around the recent changes that were made. Specifically, most of the users have completely lost interest in using the application and all of them mentioned using it less. Users are very frustrated at the fact that most of the game aspects are gone and they would like Gowalla to be the way it was before the changes. This is particularly disquieting, since most users viewed Gowalla as a fun game, and that was its greatest strength (turned into a weakness!). Furthermore, a few usability issues could be considered weaknesses, but definitely minor ones, especially compared to the prementioned one.

Future improvements

As the strengths and weaknesses of Gowalla suggest, the most important change that needs to be made is to bring more game aspects to the interaction. Another "improvement" would be to revert Gowalla back to the previous version. Lastly, we think it would be wise to offer some sort of "reward" to the frustrated users, in an attempt to regain their loyalty.

Stories, Guides and Lists

Stories

As the main function of the application Gowalla is to record where a user has been, the stories are central, and therefore it is important that they be intuitive and usable. Prior to the recent update, Gowalla also focused on the personal achievement and competition among friends with items and pins. However, after removing these features, Gowalla has adjusted the focus of the application to personal journaling and sharing travel activities. Stories are a way of creating a post that states where a user is "checking-in" to. The main focus of this feature is to record where users travel. However, users may use this as a social feature by adding friends to the story. It is also a social feature in that friends of the user can view these stories.

According to the surveys, most users prefer the term "check-in" terminology over "stories." which may suggest they are mostly interested in using the application just to record where they are over creating a 'journal entry' of sorts. However, also according to the surveys, users enjoy the ability to add other people to their stories, which may reveal the value of the social aspect of the application. We discover from the results of the usability test that the stories are intuitive and easily navigated. Through the interviews, we've gathered that users enjoy the stories and checking into destinations. One user even mentioned receiving real world rewards for checking in. The users who participated in contextual inquiry suggested that the stories were useful for journaling purposes, but they took too much time and too many steps to complete. Perhaps in the future have a simple method for those users who simply wish to quickly record their travels instead of focusing on the longer process of creating a story, which can seem daunting to users looking for a quick "check-in."

Guides

Guides are a way to suggest places that are close together so a user may visit more than one destination while in the same geographic location. Guides are created by users and can be useful to a tourist looking for new places to visit. These are closely related to lists but different in the sense that users can search guides to complete while touring. Items and pins were attached to the guides and users could gain virtual prizes for using the guide feature.

Among those users we asked to participate in various user study methods, users found the guides confusing at first, but they enjoyed having the feature available. Users often confused guides that were not a part of their immediate vicinity, which suggests need for improvement. From the

usability testing, we gather that users expected to be able to search for places other than in their immediate vicinity and may became confused when the guides tend to push information about a user's current location.

Lists

Lists are a way for users to store places for future travel, as well as favorite spots. This can be used for personal record-keeping as well as a social feature and method of sharing. Like guides, items and pins used to be attached to lists and users would gain achievements for completing guides and visiting lists of places. After the items and pins were removed, the lists became more for personal goals as well as sharing destination suggestions with friends.

According to the results of the usability tests, users did not have issues with using lists to remember destinations for future use which may be assumed is good and that the feature is intuitive. In the interviews, contextual inquiry, and surveys did not touch on the use of lists as a way to save locations or create groups of locations. However, the surveys did reveal that most users have no preference regarding the phrasing in the previous version of the application "Tours" vs. the new wording "Guides and Lists." In the future, these might be more useful if they re-incorporated items or accomplishments for completing lists and visiting far away places saved in a "bucket list."
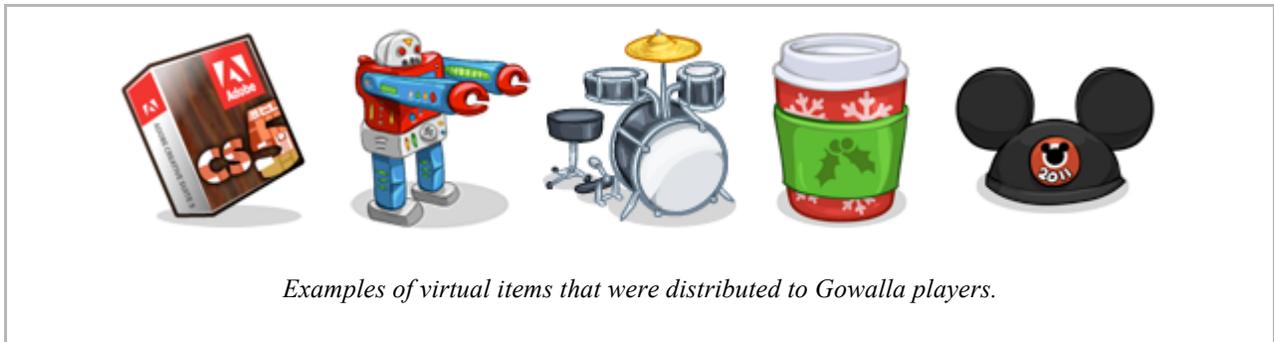
Gamification

Historically, Gowalla has included a number of game-like features that facilitated collecting. Players could collect items, stamps and pins by performing various activities within the application. The focus of the product was around personal discovery and achievement, which

differentiated it from the game-like features included in its main competitor, Foursquare, which focused more on competition. With the latest release of the product, Gowalla has moved away from this direction of personal game mechanics, in favor of social story telling. As part of our research effort, we focused some of our attention on gauging the reaction to the changes in the application as they relate to gamification.

Items

Items were virtual gifts that were sometimes awarded to players when they checked in at a spot. Gowalla created and distributed an eclectic mix of items, including drum sets, cappuccino makers, Mexican hot chocolate, Moon rocks, ski boots, and various other things. The majority of items distributed in the system were generic and intended only to be collected. However, on occasion, special items with monetary value were generated in association with corporate sponsorships. For example, in April 2010, Gowalla partnered with Adobe and distributed virtual boxes of Creative Suite 5. Players who collected this item could redeem it for actual copies of the software.

Examples of virtual items that were distributed to Gowalla players.

On August 25, 2012, Gowalla revealed they would be removing items from the next major release of the product. The official blog post announcing this decision included the justification that "fewer than half a percent of our active community makes use of (items)" (Williams).

Though the claimed usage of items was very low, the comments posted to the blog regarding this announcement were almost unanimously in opposition to the removal of items. Through our research, we gathered further insight about this potentially controversial product decision.

In the survey, we gave respondents an opportunity to answer open-ended questions about why they use the product and what they would add to it if they had the opportunity. Both questions received responses that focused on the removal of items; indicating they were a critical feature of the application for at least some users.

Question	What are your reasons for using Gowalla?	If you could add anything to Gowalla, what would it be?
Responses	"It was to collect items and keep a record of places I had visited, but now that items are gone I've found myself using Foursquare to keep a record of my places... I felt like the items in Gowalla (even if they were just icons) still felt like I was collecting something."	"I would've done more with the items and combine(d) them with offers in real life."
	"My main reason I picked Gowalla was to collect items with friends..."	"Add back items"
	"I used to like the items."	"I miss the items."

Both participants in the contextual inquiries and one of the three user interview participants commented on missing items. During the first of the two contextual inquiry subjects, the subject remarked while at the FDR Memorial that in the past, he would have specifically looked to drop and pickup items at historic landmarks. Items were an important part of his Gowalla experience and he cited their removal as one of the most significant factors in his decision to stop using the product altogether.
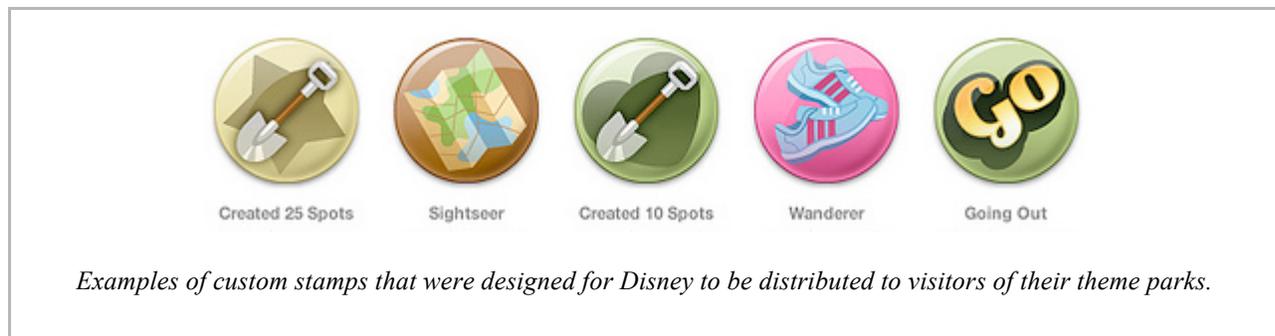
While the Gowalla team interpreted the declining use of items as an indicator to remove the feature from the product, our research suggests that users may have preferred they take the opposite approach by making items more of a focus. Some suggestions provided by our subjects include:

- Items that can be used communally.

- Items that can be redeemed for real-world products and discounts.

- Items that grow or change over time (ex. a seed that sprouts into a plant).

- Better tracking of items as they change hands amongst users.

- Better rewards for collecting sets of items.

Based on the results of the surveys, interviews, and contextual inquiries, it is our recommendation that Gowalla first restore items back into the system as they had previously been implemented and then further develop ideas for making this feature a more prominent part of the product's experience.

Pins

Pins are virtual badges that can be earned by Gowalla users for completing various activities in the system. In the past, they were awarded for reaching certain milestones, such as checking in to your first 100 spots or checking in to 10 different states, though with the latest release, theses types of achievement based pins have been removed. The only remaining pins that can be earned are for checking in to new states and countries.

Examples of custom stamps that were designed for Disney to be distributed to visitors of their theme parks.
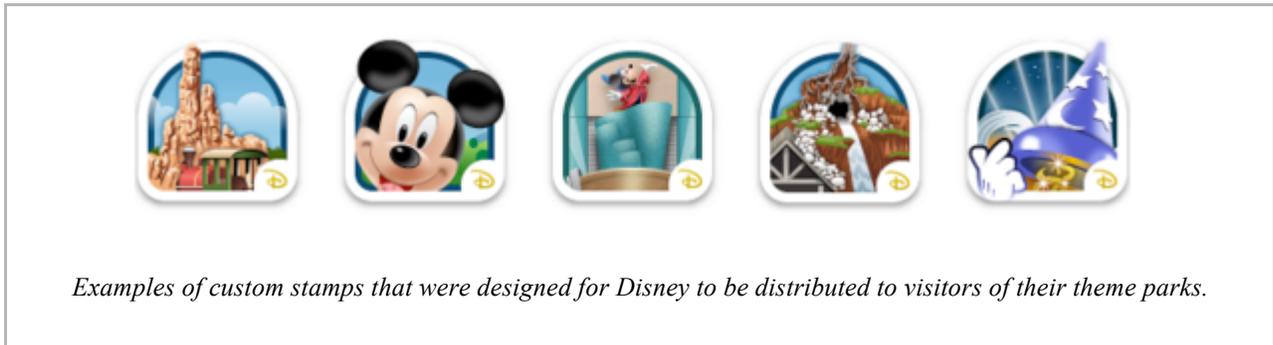
The change to pins was more subtle than the removal of items and therefore, was not noticed by our team when generating our research protocols. As a result, it was not an area we focused on, but would possibly be a good area to study if further research were to be performed. However; even though our survey questions and interview scripts did not specifically probe users to respond to the changes to pins; the lack of attention given by our test subjects to this change in the open-ended responses to the survey and throughout the interviews possibly indicates that this change is not one that users feel strongly about. In addition, we observed that Gowalla's main competitor, Foursquare, focuses a significant attention on badges; a feature similar to pins. From a strategic perspective, shifting focus away from achievement based pins could be an effective way to differentiate Gowalla's product.

Stamps

Every spot in the system has an illustrated image associated with it. For most spots, this is a standard graphic that a spot inherits through its categorization. As an example, spots categorized as food stores have a shopping bag illustration. For selected spots; such as Disney World, Yosemite National Park, Fenway Park, and other significant places; the Gowalla team designed custom stamps. These stamps were a notable differentiator between Gowalla and its competitors and certainly contribute to the overall visual aesthetic that our research subjects consistently indicated they love. In the past, when users checked in to a location, the stamp was

transferred to their profiles. In effect, people could collect stamps. Gowalla removed this

featured in the latest release of the product. While the system still keeps a record of the places

users create stories, it no longer presents these in a fashion that feels like the user is collecting.

Instead, this history is presented more like an activity stream similar to other social networks.

Examples of custom stamps that were designed for Disney to be distributed to visitors of their theme parks.

In our survey, we asked the question, "How do you feel about the absence of stamps?"

Nine of the ten respondents indicated they missed them, while the tenth respondent was neutral

to their presence. This suggests users had a strong connection to this feature and it supports the

sentiment regarding stamps discovered in the contextual inquiries. When asked about the

removal of stamps, one of the subjects responded that he used to get really "jazzed" about

collecting custom stamps and wished they had focused more on that feature, rather than remove

it.

Personal vs. Social Gameplay

The removal of items and stamps is in line with the overall direction that Gowalla headed

with their last release, which is to focus more on social sharing and less on the personal game

aspects that have historically been part of the product. In our surveys, we asked people "Do you

mostly use Gowalla as a tool for documenting your experiences for private use or as a tool to

share them?" Of the ten respondents, six indicated "I use Gowalla mostly for personal

reference." This indicates that the activity focused around individual gameplay like collecting items and stamps was a significant driver for these types of people using the product. This sentiment was echoed by the contextual inquiry subjects who both indicated that they already have plenty of social sharing options such as Twitter, Facebook, and Tumblr and don't need Gowalla to be another option for them in that regard. Both subjects expressed a desire for Gowalla to focus more, rather than less, on making its product a tool to document travel activity and would have much preferred collecting to be left in the product.

Methodology Used

As part of a larger user research effort about Gowalla, we conducted several different research methodologies to better understand differences in perspective in utilizing Gowalla. The methodologies used consist of contextual inquiry, usability testing, interviews, and surveys. We choose each technique because of the important benefits that they afford for our research. The only method that deals with new Gowalla users is the usability test, which is important to gauge a potential new client's perspective on the usability of Gowalla. In contrast, the other three methods are necessary to see if Gowalla's recent changes improve or worsen its usability for current users. Each methodology has its pluses and minuses, yet each is vital to bringing different perspectives on Gowalla. While the usability tests are crucial to understanding what features new users find either difficult or easy to use, contextual inquiry is much better suited to seeing how current users utilize Gowalla in a natural setting.

If our group only performs one research technique, then it might be difficult to gauge potential flaws in our technique and methodology. As such, different research methodologies allow our group to see if one technique shows user-interaction design flaws that another might not show. This also helps to reiterate if any particular similarities are prevalent in other group

member's findings. In addition, an interview or contextual inquiry may detect a non-verbal cue

that may not be visible in a survey. This cue might illustrate that the person actually has

difficulty in performing an action in contrast to what they might actually be saying. Moreover,

one methodology is sometimes better than another is at studying a particular issue; usability tests

do not offer the real world experience that contextual inquiry can offer. Such notions teach us

the importance of pursuing numerous methodologies to study a product's usability.

Selection of Participants

In selecting the participants, each study took a unique approach. For the contextual

inquiry study, we choose two participants because they each have a long history of using

Gowalla and share many demographic similarities. While one of the participants was informed

that the study would focus on Gowalla usage, the other was neither informed of this fact nor

given many guidelines to follow. Conversely, we choose three people who had never utilized

Gowalla for the usability test. Traditionally we would utilize a screener as suggested by

Kuniavsky to prevent the inclusion of any ill-fitting participants; however, we did not feel it

necessary for a myriad of reasons (Kuniavsky, 2003, p. 267). One such reason is that we know a

multitude of persons who fulfill the prerequisites to utilize Gowalla such as access to

smartphones and a willingness to travel. Another reason is Gowalla's aspirations for a broad

market appeal similar to its main competitor Foursquare, thus leaving us more open to find

various participant (as long as they are over 18 years of age) (Siegler, 2010). We also deemed

neither technical knowledge nor social experience, how many people a person knows, as

important demographic traits. Similar to our selection process for the contextual inquiry, our

three interview and ten survey participants were selected based on prior experience with Gowalla

and had to be within the ages of 20 and 40. We interviewed one person with whom the

interviewer was a friend and two people who were friends of another group member, as we believe the personal connection between the group members and the interviewees helped avoid awkwardness in the interview as well as one-word answers.

Preparation – Practice Techniques

In preparation for the tests, we performed several mock tests to avert potential testing errors, poor wordage, irrelevant information, and a general lack of information (Kuniavsky, 2003, p. 292). One such mock test was a usability test with a group member as a mock subject. Our colleague's critiques were valuable to enhance our definition of a usability test and description of Gowalla to participants. For instance, he suggested that we clarify our script of task actions that subjects perform since originally the tasks were depicted more in a story format. The story format was confusing and left questions that were too open-ended. He also recommended we reconfigure some of the tasks for the usability test such as the task of exploring the travel guides. Further enhancement to the script occurred after performing the first participant usability test. This change was necessary to bring the test better inline with an iPhone and Android phone because one option that makes an account private is not applicable to Android devices. In addition to a mock usability test, during a class assignment each team member came up with a few survey questions and then we all talked about them. After some additions and edits on content and phrasing, and a final review from the rest of the team, the survey instrument was ready. We also tried two mock surveys on two different people in person so that we could see if anything was unclear or missing. Equally, in preparation for the interviews, we found it very difficult to come up with the best questions, and we spent a lot of time rephrasing the interview once we had come up with the general idea for each question. The interview rehearsals helped us understand what type of questions to ask so as not to elicit an answer focused on pleasing; but rather to get the user's honest thoughts.

Learning Experience

While conducting our research, we experienced many positive and negative revelations. For instance, we learned about the difficulty and importance of making an organized project, as some of the original questions were too open-ended and not well prepared. We also realize how difficult it is to phrase things in a way that is neither leading nor awkward. Such a balance is rarely achieved and we believe that in some cases, the trade offs make a perfect balance impossible (e.g. using the phrase 'how do you feel' instead of saying 'do you feel frustrated'). Nevertheless, as we knew the users we spoke with, or at least someone in our group had a personal relationship with the users, they were more apt to reveal their honest thoughts and not try to give me an answer we would like. The personal connection allows users to relax and feel like they are conversing rather than feel like they are being tested and must give a correct answer. However, this personal connection also has the potential of making us want to give additional assistance to participants to finding a particular function or respond to a question in a particular way.

It was also difficult to find users for the surveys and interviews when only one group member was familiar with the application; thus, we believe that had we been more familiar with the application before this project, we might have had a better understanding of the users and who they are. As a result, we think finding the right users to answer our survey to be harder than we expected and finding a larger number of people seemed to be a cumbersome procedure. The learning experience also teaches us that basic assumptions that users will all interact with an application in the same way are indeed false. No matter how clear one might think a particular function is to initiate, a subject may interact with it in a completely different manner. On several occasions, we experienced such occurrences. For instance, in one of the contextual inquiries we had a plan going in for what we wanted to talk about during the session, yet unforeseen

circumstances of being stuck on the Kutz Bridge lead to two fascinating discussions about Gowalla that the interviewer had not planned for.

Moreover, a more structured and controlled testing setting for the usability test would also be preferable for future tests. We consider a consistent location, though artificial, would create more repeatable and testable results. In future test, we should set an allotment of time for a subject to perform each particular task. This allows consistency of tests and helps prevent us from becoming too anxious if a user does not find a certain user element right away. It safeguards us from the potential to interfere with the participant. Carolyn Snyder offers a nice suggestion of how much time participants should receive by multiplying the task time an expert performs a task by 3 to 10 (Kuniavsky, 2003, p. 272). We also believe that interviews are best conducted in person or through video chatting software like Skype; this affords that personal connection that telephones and instant messaging lack.

Conclusion

Overall, performing user research on a product such as Gowalla was a very interesting experience. We feel like we learned a lot during the process, not only about Gowalla, but most importantly on user research methodology. We rediscovered common mistakes and we are confident that our next user research will be much more in depth and on track.

Persona

The Loyalist

Jared Warfel

Age: 30

Education: Master's Degree

Occupation: Web Designer

Income: $75,000

Lives In: Chicago, IL

"I've been using Gowalla since it first came out. I've collected a ton of things and even help out with the Street Team."

Jared is a 30 year old male currently living in Chicago. He has spent the last 5 years working at an agency doing web design and development. He's an expert computer user and was a very early adopter of the iPhone, so he knows a thing or two about mobile apps and design.

He started using Gowalla when it first came out a few years ago and swept up in the buzz surrounding the product when he visited SXSW that year. He tried out Foursquare once, but was really turned off by the poor visual design of it and has been very loyal to Gowalla - in large part because he thinks it has a kickass interface.

He does not have any children or pets and currently lives with his girlfriend; whom he shares a car with. On the weekdays, Jared rides public transportation to work and is constantly looking for things to do on his phone to kill time while commuting to and from work. Even though he lives in Chicago, he is a huge Red Sox fan because he grew in the Boston area. He is also really into photography and cooking.

Knowledge
Domain · Technology · Experience

Interests
Pins · Stories · Stamps · Guides · Items

Goals

- Killing time on the way to work
- Tracking a history of daily activities
- Finding cool places to go while on vacation
- Finding the rarest stamps and items
- Getting more people to use Gowalla
- Collecting cool custom stamps

Websites

- Facebook
- Twitter
- LivingSocial
- Smashing Magazine
- Techcrunch
- Fab.com

Use Case & Diagram

Secondary actors

GPS API

Google Maps API

Gowalla Databases

Twitter

Facebook
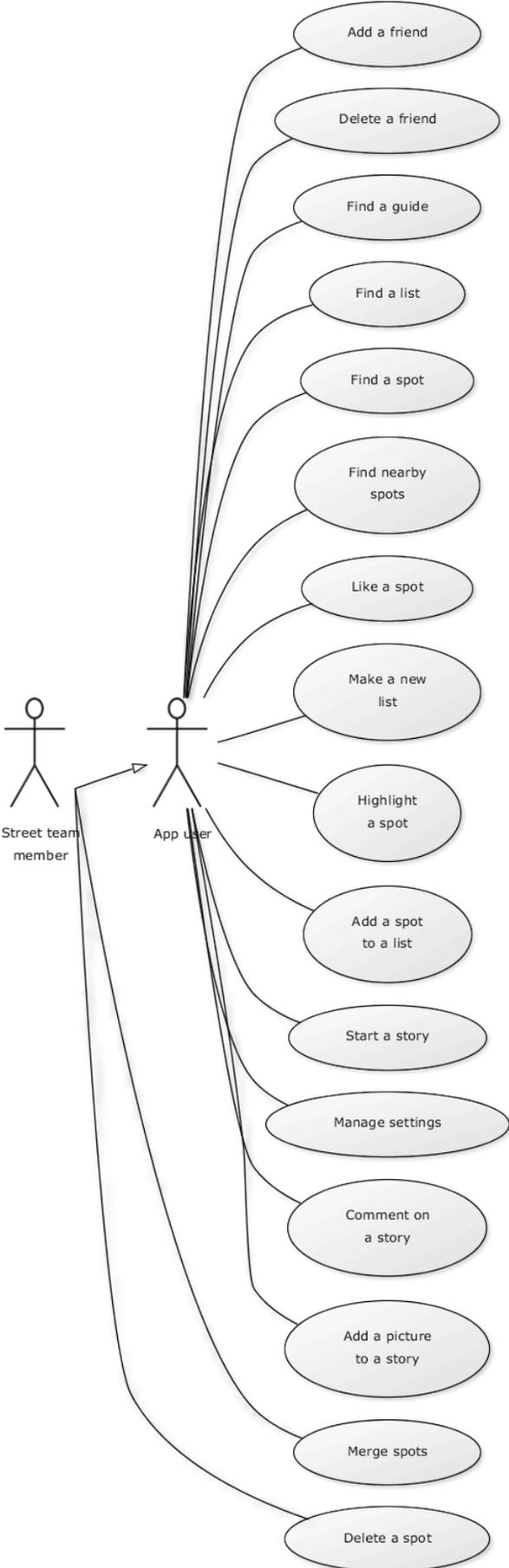
Foursquare

Phone Camera

Use Case Name	Create a New Story
Related Requirements	Sharing a story, Adding a photo, Adding a comment
Goal In Context	The user is at a location and they want to create a story there
Preconditions	Having an account, Be physically within GPS range, Have a working GPS
Successful End Condition	New story is created

Failed End Condition	New story is not created
	  GPS location not recognized as correct
	  Failed connection
	  System error

Primary Actors	App user
	Secondary Actors · GPS API, Spots Database, Google Maps
	Trigger · The user chooses the spot to create a story about

Main Flow		
	1	User navigates to a spot (There are different ways to do this ?)
	2	GPS verifies user location
	3	User indicates "I'm here"
	4	User adds friends to the story
Extensions		
	2.1	GPS does not verify locations
	2.2	"I'm here" function becomes unavailable

References

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