

## MEDIA, ENTERTAINMENT, WIRELESS

## Mobile and Interactive in Boston: On the Run with Untravel and Urban Interactive

Wade Roush 10/31/07

For a high-tech Halloween treat, check out three new multimedia walking tours of Boston and Salem, MA, set to be published today by [Untravel Media](#). The “Creeping Through Boston” tours, which can be downloaded to iPhones, video iPods, and most smart phones, include a walk through the dark back alleys and hidden passageways of downtown Boston; a tour of the historic West End, which was largely destroyed to make way for modern developments in the 1960s; and a look at the history of witchcraft in Salem, MA, through the eyes of two Wiccan high priests.

The tours are the latest example of a growing phenomenon: travel and entertainment content developed especially for mobile platforms like the Apple iPhone or iPod, the Palm Treo, the Blackberry 8800, the iRiver Clix, and the Nokia E61. Though some of these devices include phones, they’re more accurately described as multimedia computers that happen to be small enough to carry with you as you move through your day. If talking or sending the occasional text message or e-mail is all you’re doing with your smart phone, you’re missing out on the devices’ ability to bring you information and applications that can vastly enrich your experience of the world outside your home or office.

And in fact, there’s a growing cluster of companies right here in Boston offering content, applications, and marketing services for these devices. Even a short list would encompass more than 30 startups, including 80108, Aylus Networks, Buzzwire, Cielo Group, Enpocket, Digit Wireless, Everypoint, GrooveMobile, iSkoot, JumpTap, LocaModa, Mobicious, MobileLime, Mobleo, MocoSpace, MoreMagic, m-Qube, MStyle, Nellymoser, Nextcode, Peermeta, Phling, Pyxis Mobile, Skyhook Wireless, Starent, Third Screen Media, uLocate, Untravel Media, Unwired Appeal, Urban Interactive, Uterz, and Vlingo. (A nod to David Laubner at [93South](#) for his excellent Boston Mobile 2.0 Roundups Parts [Un](#) and [Deux](#).)

Recently I’ve spent time immersed in mobile multimedia materials from two of these companies—Untravel Media and [Urban Interactive](#)—and I’m here to report that the state of the art is advancing fast. Rather than offering content that draws you into the world of the device—we’ve all seen subway riders hunched over music videos



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on their iPods—both of these startups specialize in multimedia software that forces you to look outward and learn about the world around you.

Untravel, a Cambridge company founded in 2006 by MIT alumni Michael Epstein and Ira Hochman, creates mobile documentaries, or “walking slide shows,” that combine audio and still images on platforms such as the iPhone, the iRiver Clix, and Windows Mobile devices such as the Palm Treo 700w. Before the three new “Creeping Through Boston” tours, the company’s major publications included “Untravel Harvard,” an hour-long stroll around the Harvard campus narrated by members of the [Unofficial Tours](#) student group, and “Untravel MIT Stata,” a 45-minute tour of MIT’s famous Frank Gehry-designed Stata Center.



I walked over to the Stata Center yesterday to try out the tour on my iPhone, and ended up learning quite a bit about the eccentric structure, which took six years to construct at a cost of more than a third of a billion dollars. The tour, which began at the building’s northeast corner and led me in a counterclockwise loop around the perimeter and into the building itself, explained how Gehry alarmed donors and planners by creating the original models for the structure from found materials such as wood blocks, wadded-up paper, and crushed soda cans. (Such forms are still pretty obvious in the finished building, which has also been described as a jumbled collision of ideas from other buildings all over MIT and Kendall Square.)

The audio track included interviews with MIT luminaries and architecture critics and was accompanied at each stage by photographs and architectural drawings. The tour was full of nerdy but fascinating detail; for example, the building is not attached to pilings but instead “floats” on a thick concrete slab set 45 feet below ground level, which is in turn surrounded by a giant slurry wall that keeps out Charles River water. The building also sits on space once occupied by Building 20, a ramshackle World War II-era structure that housed many famous research projects, and the Stata Center’s designation in the MIT building numbering system, 32, is actually the hexadecimal code for 20.

In short, the Untravel Stata tour was the best way to learn about the building without being led about by an actual architect familiar with the project. And this being MIT, I only felt a little bit strange wandering around the building staring intently at my handheld gadget.

I’d had an entirely different mobile-software experience only a few days earlier, as a participant in a geo-adventure game organized by Urban Interactive, a Somerville company led by Babson College MBA Nicholas Tommarello. Urban Interactive sells its adventures to corporate groups as team-building exercises (sure beats rope bridges and trust falls) and also sells tickets to families and other groups, charging an incredibly reasonable \$70 per team; it describes its events as “part treasure hunt, part *Amazing Race*, and part immersive interactive cinema.”

I’d met Tommarello at a Web Innovators Group event at Venrock the previous week, and at his invitation, I showed up at the City Place Food Court in downtown Boston at exactly 4:10 pm on a warm, rainy Saturday. I was paired up with Urban Interactive production manager Pete Hollmer and a friend of his named Jeff, and Tommarello handed us a Nokia E61 cell phone, a folder containing a Boston map circa 1722, and an envelope marked “Open in Case of Emergency.” Our mission: to visit locations around Boston Common and beat a competing team to the hidden location of the remains of a powerful silver relic once protected by an 18th-century brotherhood of colonial leaders, using only clues sent to us over the

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Xconomy is six months old; we're thinking schwag. But what should it be?

- Xconomy coffee mug
- Xconomy Crocs
- Xconomy fleece
- Xconomy toothbrush (we're in an old dentist's office)
- Xconomy flash drive
- Keep thinking

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Nokia device or handed to us by actors stationed along the game route.

I was glad to be tagging along with Hollmer, who wasn't familiar with this adventure but has designed previous interactive stories for Urban Interactive, and therefore knew what he was doing. Hollmer handled the phone, which was running a custom program designed to make it look like a piece of super-secret spy gear; a gruff spymaster (played by an expertly sarcastic voice actor) periodically contacted us with an audio puzzle, and we had to seek out clues in the environment, figure out the puzzle, and enter our answer on the screen. A correct answer unlocked the next puzzle.

I won't give away the puzzles, clues, or answers; suffice it to say that they required some serious thinking and detective work—usually involving information already embedded in plaques, statues, or other examples of historical art or architecture around the Common—as well as a bit of mathematical skill and literary knowledge and a few mildly embarrassing public performances. Though I'd never met Pete or Jeff before, we were all equally intent on solving the puzzles and beating the competing team, and I had a fantastic time zooming around the downtown area with them, all three of us periodically bent over the Nokia screen as it transmitted our next precious clue. We finished the adventure in under two hours and not only beat our competitor, but achieved the second-highest score of the dozen or so teams that played that day. In fact, Tommarello later informed me that out of all 240 teams that played the game in Fall 2007, we came in fifth! (We never did have to open the emergency envelope.)

In today's universe of electronic entertainment, there are powerful forces keeping us couch-bound and chair-bound—for example, the stunning virtual game worlds of Second Life, World of Warcraft, The Lord of the Rings Online, Halo 3, or Bioshock, which require hundreds of hours to explore properly. But Untravel and Urban Interactive are demonstrating that today's electronic platforms can also enhance our experience and understanding of real outdoor environments full of hidden historical or architectural detail. And what better canvas for these explorations than Boston—a city with both a rich past and a booming, creative present?

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