App matches complete strangers

Link transmits data, but keeps anonymity

For 20 days, when you wake up, go to sleep, and everywhere you go will be sent to a complete stranger, automatically.

You haven’t been hacked, and it’s not Facebook’s newest, privacy-blurring feature. It’s 20 Day Stranger, an app designed by a group of Massachusetts Institute of Technology students and faculty to increase compassion and understanding between strangers who have never met, and never will.

“This is about finding a way of opening a window,” said Kevin Slavin, director of the MIT Media Lab’s Playful Systems group. “The idea isn’t to make your life transparent, it’s to give just enough to wonder and imagine and ultimately, to care.”

The app, still in development, matches two complete strangers and then gives a running feed of vague descriptions of where the person is, including “near an airport,” or “at a cafe.”

“We can start to develop this sense of intimate moments with somebody we don’t know and will never know,” said Tinsley Galyean, co-director of MIT’s Dalai Lama Center for Ethics and Transformative Values. “Sometimes it’s very mundane, but sometimes they’re in the hospital.”

The information is intentionally vague, not only for privacy reasons, but also as part of the user experience.

Development of the app began after Galyean asked Slavin and his Media Lab group to try to create software that could produce a sense of understanding and empathy for strangers.

"From a design perspective, it’s a really big challenge to make something that has a call to build (something) that makes people surround themselves around compassion,” said Taylor Levy, a masters student at MIT.

20 Day Stranger is just one of a growing number of apps that rely on anonymity. Apps such as Secret and Whisper, with which users post anonymous notes that can be seen by their phone contacts, do not bring out the best in people, Slavin said.

The app does not collect any information, instead acting as a link between the two strangers. Tapping into services such as FourSquare, Instagram and Google Maps, 20 Day Stranger sends photos that have been taken where the stranger is, but without any geographical or identifying information. A user would have to recognize a photo to figure out where their stranger is in the world.

“It is explicitly about producing imagination and conjecture, not transmitting information,” Slavin said. “What we’re interested in is the passive qualities of living your everyday life.”

More On: 20 Day Stranger  Massachusetts Institute of Technology  Kevin Slavin  MIT Media Lab

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