

CAMPUS LIFE

Having fun with Facebook gadgets

CRYSTAL NEO meets the maker of Extended Info, a popular application on the social networking website

TREY Philips may be studying about the great Chinese philosopher Mo Zi, whose moral teachings focus on self-reflection. But he has his own approach towards life. The creator of Extended Info, a Facebook application, doesn't believe in taking life too seriously – he feels that having fun while doing things that are meaningful to him makes more sense.

"I do a lot of things for fun, not because I should be doing them or my parents are making me do them or something," he says. Mr Philips is currently at the National University of Singapore this semester for a student exchange programme.

The philosophy and psychology major from the University of Texas at Austin says that his interest in computers was sparked off as a young teenager when he started designing websites for fun. "The first ones were mostly a joke where my friends would do funny things in front of the web cam, just to be goofy," he tells BT.

Facebook is a social networking site launched in 2004. Extended Info is a Facebook application that allows users to customise the fields in their profile information. Instead of filling out the fields provided by Facebook, such as "Favourite Movies" or "About Me", users of Extended Info can type their own field titles, such as "Languages Spoken" or "Favourite Drinks", and can even include videos or songs in their responses.

Mr Philips's Facebook application won him the Red Bull Flight Experience during this year's Facebook F8 Conference. He worked on his award-winning application alone, taking only about four to five hours to develop it.

Extended Info garnered more than 60,000 users within its first four days, placing it among the top ten most popular Facebook applications at the time. The number of users has since grown significantly. Today, Extended Info has over 150,000 registered worldwide users and averages about 3,500 active users on a daily basis.

Mr Philips shared the story of his experience creating a Facebook application at Asia's first-ever Facebook Developer Garage. The event, organised by current and former students of the NUS Overseas Colleges (NOC) programme, was held on Oct 24 at NUS. Previous events were held in San Francisco, Toronto, Seattle and London.

A few weeks after Extended Info was created, SideStep, a travel company, acquired the application and its 130,000 users for an undisclosed amount. In addition to the acquisition, Mr Philips was also offered an internship at SideStep, where he worked on further improving Extended Info and creating new Facebook applications for SideStep. The offer for Extended Info by SideStep was among more than a dozen Mr Philips received for his award-winning application.

Selling his application to SideStep shortly after its launch may seem like a rash decision to some

due to the possibility that the value of the application could appreciate over time. But Mr Philips disagrees, as he feels that SideStep is the best company to take care of his application.

Another issue that he took into consideration was the issue of privacy, which Mr Philips says is important to him. "I was very worried about privacy. I have a lot of people's private information so I don't want it to be sold to advertisers or anybody," he says. He adds that he didn't want to have to dabble in business issues while still in school, so as to be able to focus better on his studies.

However, the initial success of his application did not last long. Extended Info's popularity took a hit after other application creators made use of the invites option to increase their number of users, he says.

He refused to join the bandwagon and use invites to draw more users to his application. Instead, Mr Philips chose to rely on the News Feed and Notification applications where users are informed about new applications that their friends add to their page.

"I was just fundamentally opposed to the idea because it's just very annoying. I just want my application to be as clean and friendly as possible," he says. "You can tell when an application is only there to grow. It's kind of like a virus. It doesn't really have too much functionality. They just want a whole bunch of users."

The decline in popularity was not the only problem Mr Philips faced. Maintaining the application meant working late hours into the night to ensure its smooth running.

"To make a small change to it, you know that you're going to have to take it down for a few seconds at least. And taking it down for a while when you're getting a few hits per second, several people are going to see an error screen," he says. "You have to deal with these types of issues."

The changes that Facebook makes once a week also means that he has to adapt and keep up with the changes.

While there may be all sorts of problems in running an application, Mr Philips says the solutions to the problems should focus on one thing – the user.

He cites an example of how he handled a problem he faced three weeks ago when Facebook changed the way data was sent to their servers of application. For Mr Philips, the information uploaded by his application users became lost. Although the number of users affected was minimal, Mr Philips says that this doesn't mean that it can be overlooked.

"I go out of my way to satisfy everybody even if they are statistically insignificant. Thirty people out of 150,000 is really not much. But I can imagine being one of the 30. It's very very annoying to type something up and lose it," he says. "You talk to the person, you tell them you're sorry and you explain the story."



ARTHUR LEE

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