Anatomy of an Early Social Networking Site

Alan Dix, Russell Beale, Nadeem Shabir, Justin Leavesley

Talis, Lancaster Uni., Birmingham Uni.

http://www.hcibook.com/alan/papers/hci2011-vfridge

---

vfridge – early social networking site

leave messages for friends

add notes from your mobile phone using WAP

share holiday photos

why did it fail?
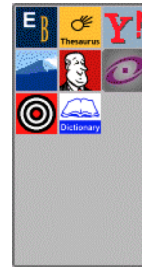## or ...
why aren't we billionaires?

background

1999 – dot.com era

existing start up aQtive
– intelligent internet agent onCue

2000 – dot.com crash!

... but spawned a spin-out!

the future of the web
(in 1999)

dominant view:
– expecting 'shake out'
– small number of large players
– future of web as TV-style broadcast medium

we thought differently ....

the websharer vision (1999)

" The web/Internet is not just a medium for publishing, but a potential shared place.

Everyone may be a web sharer — not a publisher of formal public 'content', but personal or semi-private sharing of informal 'bits and pieces' with family, friends, local community and virtual communities ..."

sounds prescient (web 2.0!)

and was translated into a product (vfridge)
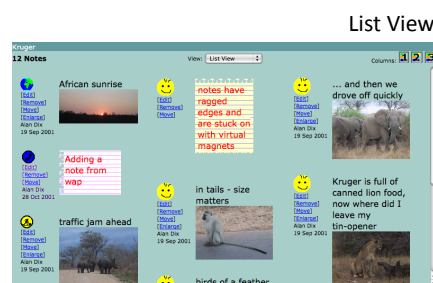
so why didn't it work?

timeline of vfridge

1999 – first implementation – stand-alone Java app with bespoke server

later first web version using applet

2000 – dot.com crash
but seed funding for vfridge.com ☺

2002 – vfridge mothballed ☹

2010 – 'facsimile' version reproduced in PHP!

demo

navigation buttons

current user

details of selected note

main virtual fridge 'door'
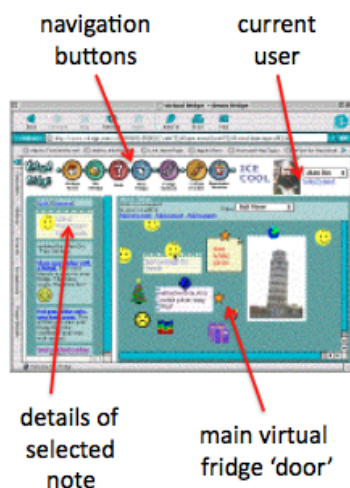
Close Up

List View

technical barriers

applets – write once run nowhere

Java and SQL (PHP rebuild 10 days)

- poor docs, lack of examples, & still today ...

pre Ajax

– but some clever tricks: image loads and frames

cross browser

– blood and tears ... still today many IE-only sites!

market barriers c2000

downloads very slow

– easy to forget today, but not gone away

e.g. 2 Gb software updates!

use of web limited

– esp. problematic for collaborative apps.

c.f. now multi-platform issues FB etc.

dialup rather than 'always on' connections

– but try accessing mobile web out of urban areas

commercial pressures

need to demonstrate ROI (return on investment)

'get big fast' => 'make money quick'!

=> divided focus:
  – intranets, schools, homes

vision

big vision (websharer) great

metaphor (fridge door) loved
          but text version loved too!

locked into surface appearance
          forgot the big vision

Facebook could have been produced on '99 web

last words

keep sight of the vision

but hard:
   needs both technical & business nouse