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TECHNOLOGY

GPS Goes Mainstream

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Heard on Morning Edition

By Dan Charles



After this Christmas, millions of people no longer have any excuse for being lost. That's because they got GPS navigation devices in their stockings. It was one of this year's hottest gifts.

"Everybody's buying them. Everybody," said Kyle Butler-Myers, who works at a Best Buy store in Washington, D.C.

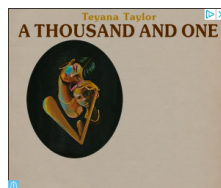
The people who are lining up to get their hands on satellite navigation do not appear to be gadget enthusiasts.

In fact, 2007 was the year when the Global Positioning System finally went mainstream. It's everywhere: in cars, cell phones and strapped onto the arms of joggers. A spokesman for Avis said 10 percent of the company's rental cars now leave the lot with a GPS device on-board. That is twice the number of just a year ago.

As asking directions gives way to listening to instructions from a GPS unit on the dashboard, some scientists are wondering whether the technology will change the way people see and understand the world around them.

Holly Taylor, a psychologist at Tufts University, said many of those who love maps already use GPS technology to explore geography in new ways. For example, they use GPS to record their route while biking or hiking, then lay that out on a conventional paper map or load it into a computer program such as Google Earth. That allows them to see their movements in a new way, and "get that insight: 'Oh! I was really close to this vista while I was hiking. Next time I go on that hike, I can take off on that trail and get this beautiful view.'"

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People who have trouble with directions seem to use GPS as a technological crutch; it's a way to avoid learning.

"Now they don't have to figure out how to get around, because they just program those addresses into their GPS," Taylor said.

But even for the directionally challenged, GPS can reveal hidden features of the landscape.

"I like to drive and listen to things," said Jim Carrier, who founded a small company called Intellitours. "It occurred to me a long time ago that as I drive along, I'd like to know what I'm seeing as I pass."

So, Intellitours is creating a location-activated soundtrack for portions of the interstate highway system. Travelers will be able to load it into their GPS navigation devices. Then, upon arriving at the appropriate location, the GPS will start playing a description of that region or the history of that spot.

It's a little bit like the audio tours you can rent in museums, except that this museum is as big as the country, and you never have to leave. At a point just outside Richmond, Va., for instance, the GPS device will describe the efforts by Union forces to capture that city during the Civil War, including excerpts from diaries kept by residents of Richmond at the time.

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"Hopefully, they will be drawn into the story and as they drive through Richmond at 80 miles an hour, they will come away with a richer sense of the history there," said Carrier.

This kind of thing is likely to become a lot more common. A GPS device could become your guide to the world: to restaurants, hospitals, even real estate listings.

But in fact, it can only guide you to things that are stored in its digital map of the world. Carrier worries a little about how that map will be created. Businesses may buy their right to a listing, while lots of other places could remain invisible.





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