PickUp
Contextual Inquiry

Team Members

Ian Crofoot (Design Coordinator)
Sunil Garg (Documentation Coordinator)
Mitch Ishimitsu (Testing Coordinator)
Daniel Swisher (Group Manager)

Problem and Solution Overview

   As people plan casual sporting activities, one of their main tasks is to locate other people interested in participating at a mutually convenient time. At times, this becomes quite a challenge, since people generally depend on their existing social networks, which may or may not contain the people they're looking for. Additionally, coordinating such games with large groups of people is not a simple task. Our application seeks to improve upon the status quo by making it easier to find people with shared sporting interests, skill level, and compatible scheduling and location preferences.

Contextual Inquiry Participants

   In identifying participants for our inquiry, we first visited the IMA and conducted short interviews with people there who were playing basketball, volleyball, table tennis, and other sports, in order to gain a sense of how they planned their games and, if they chose to participate in pickup games, what difficulties they encountered in doing so. After conducting these interviews, we identified a few varying scenarios and preferences and chose individuals to observe with the objective of broadly covering the different use cases.

Participant 1: Devon

   Devon is a 22 year old student at the University of Washington who is majoring in biology. He is on an intramural football team this fall, and has played several other intramural sports including softball, and volleyball. Devon also enjoys playing pickup games of basketball at the IMA.
   We chose Devon because his basketball habits indicate that he doesn't mind playing pickup games with strangers, yet when it comes to football, he chooses intramural games because he says that it is the only reliable means to find games to play in. Devon is a good representation of many people who choose organized sports over spontaneous pickup games, and Devon can also help us understand how organized teams like intramural teams organize pickup game practices. We observed Devon on two different days; the first was Friday, at his house, when he used Facebook and his phone to organize a practice for his team to be held on Saturday. The second observation occurred on Saturday, when his team met at Denny Field and attempted to find another team to scrimmage with. We explained to Devon what we wanted to learn through his teaching: how he set up practices and found teams to scrimmage with.

Participant 2: John

The second person we observed, John, is a fellow member of Ian's fraternity. He plays club soccer, intramural soccer, basketball, flag football, and frisbee through the IMA, and for fun and practice, he kicks the ball around and plays pickup games when he can. He is in charge of coordinating sports within the fraternity. We chose to follow John because he is a skilled athlete, is knowledgeable about many sports and the mechanics of setting up games, both organized and unorganized. His experience with completely spontaneous games was a particular emphasis of our observation, as our other interviews were in the context of scheduling a game.

We interviewed him as he arranged practice on Sunday. He had asked a few guys in the house if they wanted to play, and then headed down to the IMA fields to kick around and see if they could get a game going. We wanted to observe his behavior as he gathered the initial crew, and the setup of the game at the usual venue where he played his pickup games. We asked him questions related to what he was currently doing; how it differed, if at all, from his usual practices; and what else might happen in the situation if conditions were different.

Participant 3: Jasmine

We also spoke with Jasmine, a junior at UW and captain of an intramural volleyball team. She likes playing intramural sports because of the team cohesion and the accountability in others to participate. As a result, she says she typically does not like playing alone, but prefers to play with friends whom she's familiar with. She enjoys gathering groups of people she knows to practice together and compete. We were able to interview her as she was setting up a Facebook message to the team and spoke briefly about what takes place at practices. Jasmine was chosen due to her experience as a sports captain and leadership role in forming organized practices.

Contextual Inquiry Results

The "Planned vs. Spontaneous" Divide

We immediately noticed that people generally chose whether or not to organize games in advance depending on whether they expected that they would be able to find players and/or games spontaneously. At the IMA, basketball players would show up to the facility without any prior arrangement because they could expect to easily find others, but we did not find the same to be true for any other sports -- thus, players of sports such as table tennis and volleyball had to pre-arrange games in advance, both casually (eg. by calling friends in advance) or formally (eg. by joining or organizing an intramural team).

Coordinating Schedules

One task that two of our interviewees had to take on was coordinating schedules between a large group. The difficulty with this is having to compare several different schedules and find a common time when everyone is available. Devon and Jasmine both have a consistent group of people who play in weekly practices. Whereas the time for Devon's football practice can change from week to week depending on people's schedules, Jasmine looked over everyone's schedules early on when their team was formed and set a fixed weekly time. Both of them used Facebook to send out the message asking everyone for their individual schedules.

Jasmine has a group for her volleyball team and sends messages to everyone in the group, whereas Devon simply messages those he knows he needs to.

After the time was chosen by the coordinator, another message is sent out and the others confirm whether they can come or not. On the day before the event, Devon called all of his friends, even if they confirmed on Facebook, to see if they were committed to coming or not. Jasmine only called those who hadn't confirmed they can make it, but additionally sent out a reminder to everyone that practice was the next day.

Both of these strategies have a lot in common: there is one person who is actually in charge of picking a time and coordinating the communication.

Communication Methods

How other participants were contacted was also a defining factor of how pickup games are started. Both Jasmine and Devon used Facebook for initial contact with their large groups. Jasmine says she likes Facebook because it makes it easy to connect with others and to form group activities. They also called individual players to confirm commitments.

John only needed a few players for his spontaneous event, and since he lives in a house with over eighty other guys, he used that resource, simply asking a few guys if they wanted to play. Sometimes, if he's trying to start a larger or more formal event, he will page the whole house over the intercom, announcing that they'd be heading out in a few minutes. But he was driving down to the IMA fields, and wouldn't be able to fit more guys in his car anyways, so he just asked a few of the more serious soccer players.

John also noted that after enough pickup games, you begin to see familiar faces, and numbers are exchanged, and people will send out mass texts to all the soccer buddies they've met, proposing a game that day.

Aside from planning and coordinating purposes, we also witnessed Devon using facebook to discuss strategies and plays with his teammates.

Finding Other Players/Starting the Game

After a person or group has all their friends together and are at the venue, the next step is to find the other players and actually get the game going. One unifying theme between all of our interviewees was choosing the right time to be able to find other players. Different venues have times where they tend to be full, perhaps overcrowded, and times where they are empty or unavailable.

John mentioned that on sunny weekday afternoons, pickup games "happen on their own". When he arrives with his small group, if they fail to find a large game happening, they work with what's available. They start as a small scrimmage of 2v2 or 3v3, but this quickly grows as people show up and join in, up to 5v5 or 7v7. He finds people are almost always willing to play—it's why they're down there, but that someone has to start the game before it can grow. "If you build it, they will come."

On the day that we observed him, it was a Sunday—not his usual day for heading down there—and unfortunately we found that all the fields were taken for intramural flag football. The other guy who John had recruited at home suggested playing at Denny Field, but John shot this idea down because, he thought they wouldn't be likely to find a big group of people trying to play soccer there.

Devon failed to find any football players besides his own group while he was at Denny Field, as it was raining that day and so most people probably didn't go out. Even so, they still scrimmaged with the eight players they had. He says they usually don't have a problem finding other people, because the times they go at tend to be in the afternoon on weekends, or the afternoon to evening on weekdays, and these are times when others tend to be on the field looking to play football.

Sometimes the issue isn't finding enough players, though, it's that there are too many. John says that when too many people join in a game, it becomes disorganized and is no longer fun. Often times people have to sit out on smaller fields, and that's no fun. Jasmine says that when the IMA is really busy it can be hard to find an opening on the courts for her team to play.

Social Aspects

In playing sports, especially with strangers, many social factors arise that can enhance or detract from the experience. Certain traits in the individual players can have a strong effect on how fun or useful the game winds up being. Skill level and seriousness are two very important ones. When Devon called all the members of his team, many of them asked who was already planning on showing up. They wanted to know if enough serious members of their team were going to be there, so that the practice and potential game would be useful and fun. John says that when he plays unorganized sports, he tends to be one of the best players on the field, and that he adapts to others' lower skill level and tries to make them better by giving them the right challenge—but too many unskilled players can lead to a lot of frustration and also a lot of injuries.

John contrasted his experience in unorganized games to his experience in club sports. The thing he likes about club sports is that you are on a solid team of committed players, and that you know everyone's names—crucial for communication on the field--and their strengths and weakness—crucial for performance.

New and Existing Tasks

Easy Task: Spontaneously Find a Game to Play in, as an Individual

Kurt is a 31 year old who enjoys playing basketball. There is a park about a ten minute drive away from where Kurt lives, and through observation, and trial and error Kurt has discovered that around noon on Sundays there are usually friendly people playing basketball that will let him join in on games. Hoping his past experiences serve him well, Kurt ventures to the park around noon on Sunday. Luckily for Kurt there is a group of people picking teams, for a basketball game, and they are one short of an even five on five. Kurt joins them and enjoys the game. While Kurt was able to find a game it has taken him many failed attempts in the past to discover a likely time and place; and should no one be there Kurt has wasted twenty minutes of his time in driving. This scenario is also extremely similar to people that venture to the IMA with only guesses about whether players will be there. Our application could save Kurt's valuable time by allowing him to find out whether people have started a game of basketball at the park he knows about. However, it could also possibly find him games at a park that is closer to his house saving him even more time. Lastly if Kurt couldn't find any games he could create his own ensuring that one way or another Kurt can play basketball when he likes without wasting time.

Medium Task: Organizing a Pickup Game, Ahead of Time

Patrick is a 19 year old student at the University of Washington. Patrick loves to play football, and decides to organize a game.

Step 1: Choosing a Time

He sends out a Facebook message to fourteen friends asking if anyone would like to play and if so what times they are available. He gets back eleven responses from friends who would

like to play and vague schedules of when they are available. He studies the schedules and his own to find out that 1:00 pm Saturday seems like the best time. Patrick is lucky to find a time that works for seemingly everyone, and despite a lot of work the establishment of a time is important to Patrick because while equipment and venues are plentiful, finding times that work for many hard-working college students is difficult. This task is also more difficult than it sounds, as Patrick has to hunt through eleven schedules to find a time, which is a lot of labor to be placed on one person. This heavy labor involved with organizing a game is enough to stop some from trying. Patrick could greatly reduce the amount of work it takes to start games by using our system which should allow Patrick's friends to inform the system about when they are free; allowing the system to then find times that are convenient for everyone.
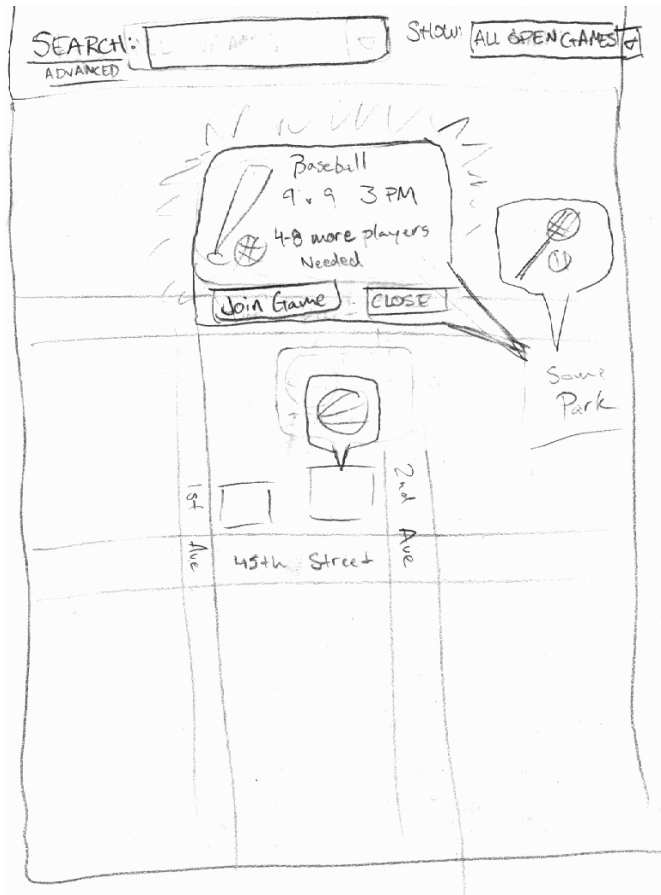
Step 2: Confirming Commitments

    Patrick then creates a Facebook event with the newly chosen time of 1:00 pm Saturday and invites the eleven friends who had previously shown interest in playing. Patrick does this because he wants to confirm the time with his eleven friends as well as remind them of the game. The day before the game Patrick checks the Facebook event page to make sure that all eleven are still able to go. Unfortunately two people's schedules have changed and won't be able to make it. Nervous that this might be a bigger problem Patrick makes calls to the other players and ensures each that the game is still on as well as describing who can and cannot make it. Patrick receives verbal or text message confirmations from all but the two who backed out. Again a lot of work is put on Patrick, as he holds the game together by calling and making confirmations that make sure everyone knows the game is still on and who all will be going. If Patrick decides for whatever reason that he can no longer participate the game is suddenly at risk of never happening, essentially Patrick is a potential failure point. Our application should allow Patrick to setup automated team reminders, that remind and confirm whether or not each player will show up via either email, text messaging, or automated phone calls. This way Patrick has almost no work to do once the initial setup is done; and he is therefore no longer a failure point for the game.

Hard Task: Organizing a Team and Finding Another Team to Play Against

    Jenny is the team captain of an intramural soccer team, she and her team would like to find another team to scrimmage with, instead of having a formal practice. Jenny and her team don't want to play another intramural team because they don't want to give up the element of surprise or lose to the team in scrimmage which could discourage them when they play the team officially. Jenny asks around and finds a group of friends of friends that like to play soccer but currently are not part of an intramural team. Jenny then proceeds to follow the same set of tasks as Kurt in the above example (Organizing a Pickup Game, Ahead of Time), except on a much larger scale, as she has to coordinate schedules and make confirmations for two teams. Aside from even the large amount of work that comes with the additional people, Jenny also had to find the other team which is often not as easy as asking around in your group of friends. Jenny either gets lucky or has an unusual amount of highly active soccer loving friends, the point being that this task has many complicated pieces that all have to work if there is an chance of success. Just as with Kurt our application could help Jenny organize and manage all of the complicated parts of this event. Additionally our application could help Jenny with the non-trivial task of finding an opposing team as our application should have a way to search and challenge or invite teams to play one another.

Sketches

FIND A GAME

Sport: [TENNIS (DOUBLES)] [▽]

Near: [CURRENT LOCATION] [⊕]

I am [BY MYSELF] [▽]
[IN A GROUP]

Skill Level: [ADVANCED] [▽]

BEGIN: [3 PM ▽] TO [5:45 PM ▽]

DURATION: [1 hr ▽] TO [1 hr 30 m ▽]

[FIND IT!]

---

upcoming game
ULTIMATE

where?
IMA Fields [map]
[suggest another place]

who's playing?
Devon
Kurt
Jenny
[invite more]
[send confirmation]

when?