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Take my iPhone out to the ballgame?

As post-season play heats up, a few folks at Major League Baseball were gathered, not in Pittsburgh or Atlanta or St. Louis or Los Angeles, but in Queens, N.Y.

They weren't at Citi Field to watch the Mets in a playoff game. They were at the ballpark for a demonstration of the latest technology designed to use mobile devices to enhance the in-park fan experience.

MLB is testing enhancements to its At the Ballpark mobile app that relies on micro-location-based services to trigger information, assistance and fan-loyalty offers for a customized — and customizable — individual fan experience every time a user visits a ballpark. Down the road, the app may also be used to enhance sponsor messages and displays with ad content.

The current version of the At the Ballpark app allows fans to personalize their experience by checking in at the ballpark; interacting on social media during the game; and being able to view and download content, including team schedules, ticket information, directions, parking information, player stats and video highlights, as well as ballpark and player entrance music.

The app provides an A-to-Z guide for every major league ballpark, as well as access to food and beverage ordering and seat upgrade functions at some venues. Users who check in at the park receive in-app offers and can unlock loyalty rewards. They can also customize the app to feature a designated favorite ballpark, and use the My Journal feature, a personal history for all ballparks they visit, to record their check-in history, including manually entering past ballpark visits and uploading photos from those visits as far back as 2005.

The new location-based feature, which MLB will continue to test and develop during the off-season, uses Apple Inc.'s

iBeacon and Bluetooth Low Energy technology to provide enhancements that are much more real-time and interactive.

Sensors, called beacons, placed throughout ballparks interact with the app whenever a mobile device with the app comes within range. The beacons trigger the app, which then acts as an interactive guide to the ballpark — offering a welcome message; displaying ticket and seat information; providing fun facts and historical information; and even giving turn-by-turn directions to seats or offering mobile coupons for food and merchandise as fans approach a vendor.

As with the current app, the information is specific to the stadium, so that a fan entering Turner Field in Atlanta would experience different information and messaging than one entering Citi Field.

Much like it did for those who attended the late-September demo at Citi Field, for example, At the Ballpark would display a Welcome to Citi Field message as a fan approaches the gates to the park.

At the gates, the app would automatically display the barcode for the fan's tickets if they were loaded into Apple Passbook (the iPhone digital ticket app) or were purchased online through certain ticketing agencies that partner with MLB.

Once inside the park, the app would then provide seat-location information, including a seat mapper, which provides turn-by-turn directions to the seat. As the fan walks through the stadium, other beacons trigger the app to display information and videos. For example, a beacon positioned near the iconic Mets Home Run Apple — which originally lived at Shea Stadium and is now displayed near the entrance to Citi Field — triggers the app to notify the user that an in-app video on the history of the apple is available.



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Because the new location-based technology records the fan's presence at the field without the fan having to check-in, it also allows the app to provide a different experience each time the user visits the park.

For example, once a user has viewed the video history of the Home Run Apple, the app will not alert the user to the video again the next time the app senses the beacon signal (although the user apparently would have the choice to select and view the video again through the app).

Similarly, the current version of the app requires users to check in to receive deals on food and merchandise, serving as a sort of loyalty card that gives fans better, more customized offers the more often they visit the ballpark and check in with the app.

The enhanced version of the app will use the location-based services to trigger the offers — without the need for checking or even opening the app.

One key enhancement that the new technology provides is that the app continues to operate in the background, even if the user has clicked away from it on mobile device.

When the app detects a signal from a beacon — as the user approaches the team store, for example — it would alert the user to a deal offer, regardless of whether the user is currently using the app.

For now, the beacons installed

at Citi Field are temporary, for the purposes of the demonstration last month. The Mets reportedly will be the first MLB club to launch the system, however, and are aiming to have it operational for the 2014 season.

While the iBeacon and Bluetooth technology is preferable to GPS, which is less accurate and does not function well indoors, the league will continue to test and refine the system to ensure that the beacons interact effectively with the app under normal game-day conditions.

Interest in the system among other MLB clubs is apparently high and other ballparks are expected to implement the technology in the next regular season, although the league has not announced which teams are next on the list. At present, the enhanced app also functions only on the iPhone.

Despite the various potential data the new micro-location-based technology could provide and the uses for that data that the app could afford the league and its teams, MLB is reportedly being mindful of consumer privacy issues — and consumer comfort.

Providing an enhanced and enjoyable fan experience is the goal. Making fans feel like they are being stalked is not.

To make sure that fans are comfortable with the experience, MLB intends to offer additional privacy settings in its app.