



Hacking the friendly skies: creating apps for wearables at 36,000 feet

BY BRAD MOLEN @PHONEWISDOM 2 DAYS AGO

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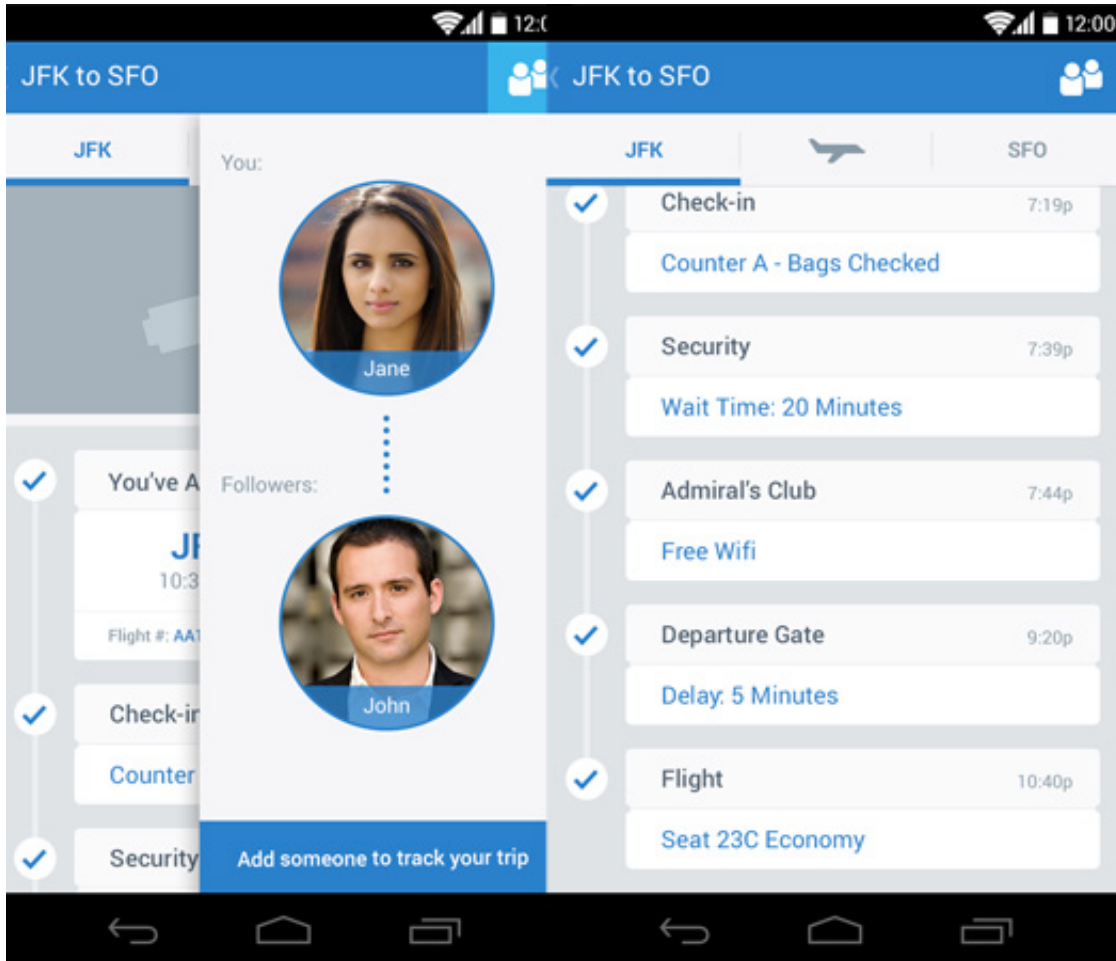
Few activities are as taxing, time-consuming and mentally draining as air travel, and there are hundreds of thousands of travel-related apps to help us get from point A to point B with as little

hassle as possible. But there's always room for improvement, especially now that wearables like [Android Wear](#), the [Pebble](#) smartwatch and embedded sensors are growing in popularity. While it's already possible to scan boarding passes or receive flight notifications on smartwatches, there are surely other use cases that would ease the burden of flying. [Wearable World](#), which teaches wearable-related startups the ins and outs of the business, partnered with [American Airlines](#) to create what it's billing as "the first in-air wearables hackathon." Teams were asked to come up with the best travel app for wearables, and the finalists got to jump on one of the airline's newest planes to polish their app and show it off to real-life passengers.



Calling it an "[in-flight hackathon](#)" is debatable, since the biggest chunk of the event actually took place on the ground in San Francisco. In traditional hackathon style, 200 developers had 24 hours to create a travel-related wearables app from scratch. Finalists were chosen and given 30 days to work on their app before it was time to get on an Airbus A321T from San Francisco to JFK Airport. Here, the four teams tested their creations in a real-life setting, which included going through security, boarding the plane, using in-flight WiFi ([Gogo](#) was a sponsor) and limited workspace in Economy Class. This was their last chance to make any tweaks based on their in-flight experience. The next day, each finalist boarded another A321T bound for San Francisco and pitched several

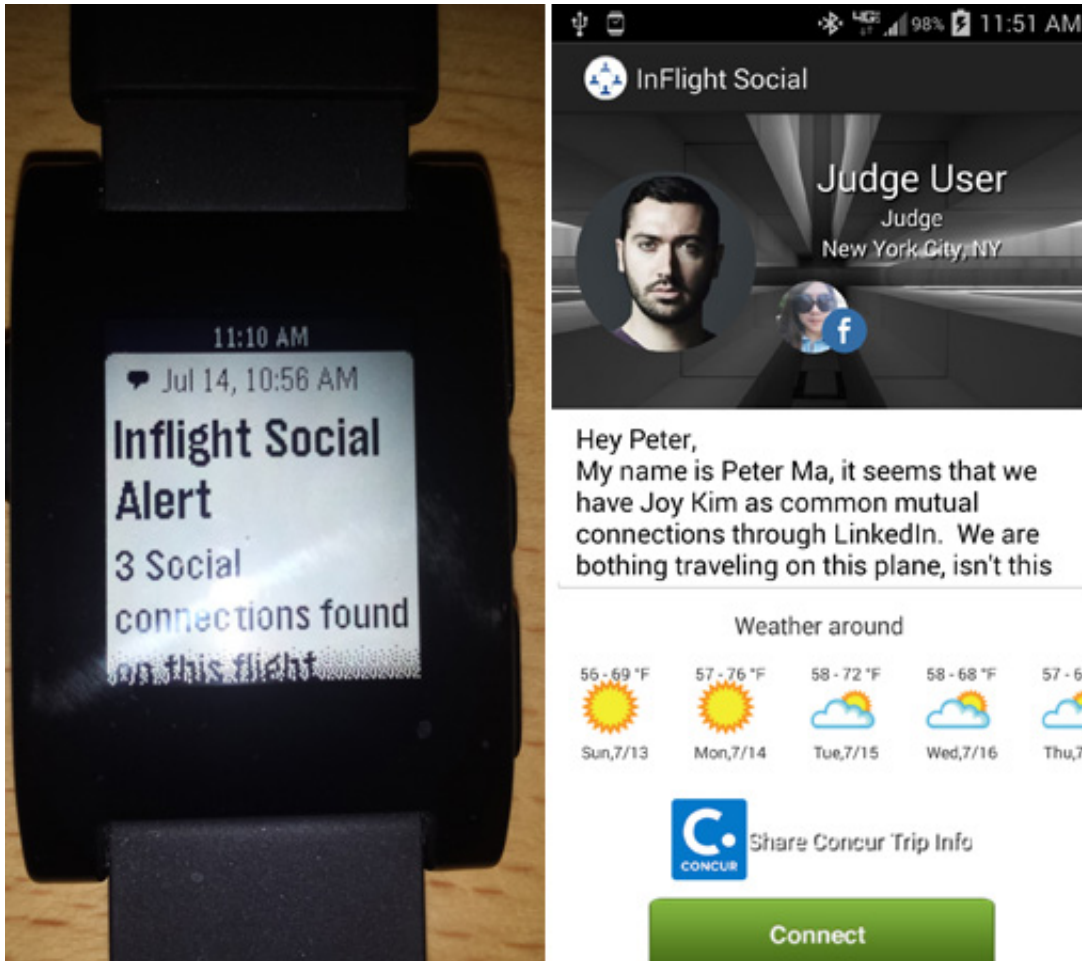
people on the flight who acted as judges.



The winning app came from Ustwo (the creators of *Monument Valley*), and is handy for family or close friends that like to monitor where you are in your travels. As you arrive at the airport, make it through security, board the plane, take off and land, the app pushes notifications to both you and another person of your choice. Even though two devices are involved, each one shows different information based on who's using it; your device (and smartwatch, if applicable) shows flight information, boarding passes and other details that may help you get to the plane, while your loved one will get updated on what stage of the experience you're in. When you're in-flight, they'll also be able to follow your plane's location.

Since GPS isn't available indoors, the app relies on a network of common-use *iBeacons* placed at various points within the airport (known as the SITA registry, it's currently undergoing a trial run at Dallas/Fort Worth Airport). The beacons communicate with your phone as you pass by, and the app will send notifications as it detects each one along the way. The primary issue is that the app relies on these beacons in order to work in every airport. As a result, it may be limited to use in specific

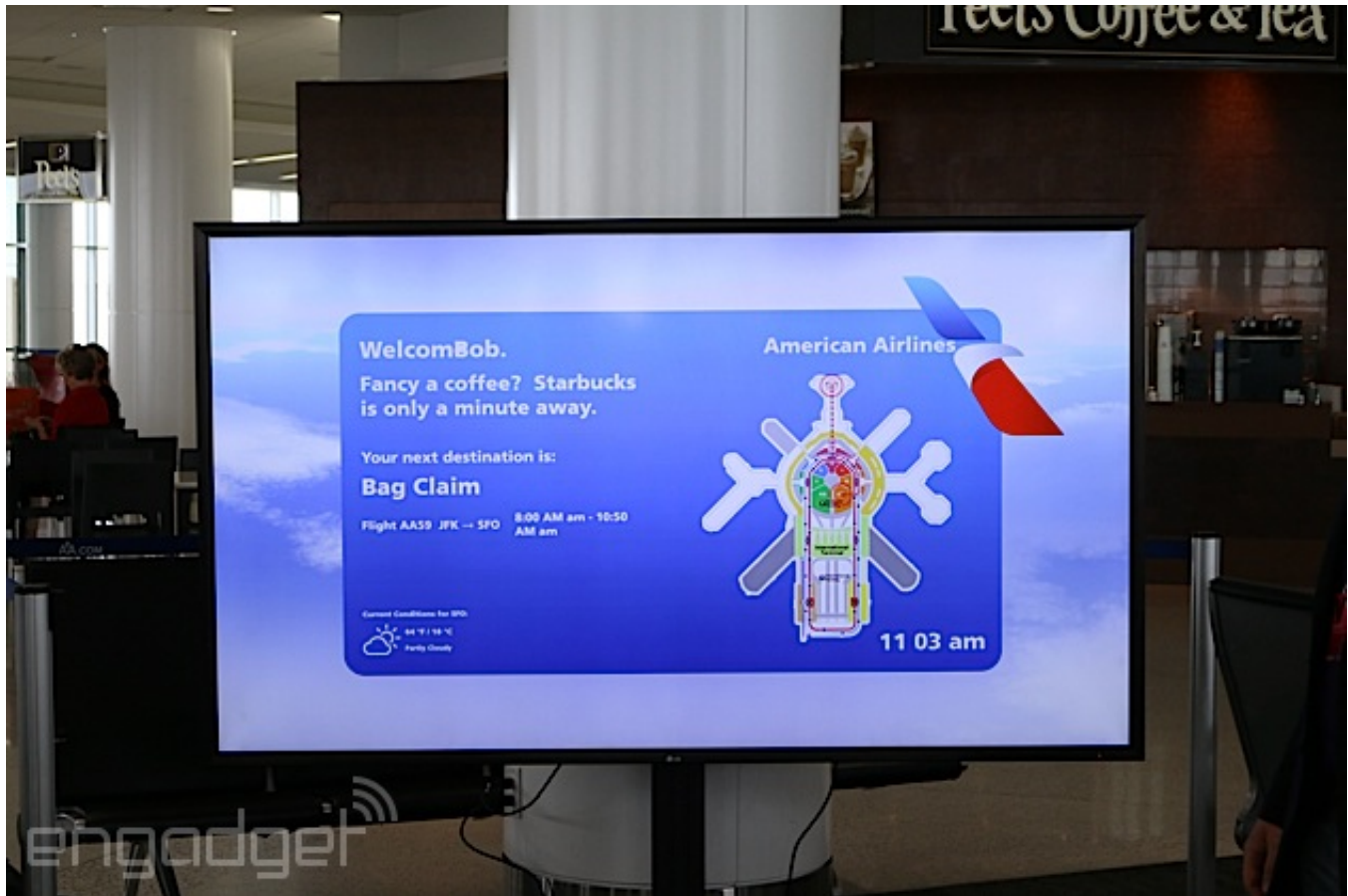
locations at first.



Next up was InFlight Social, an app that wants to connect you with other people on the plane. When you get on the flight and connect to WiFi, InFlight Social can detect if anyone else on the plane is using the app; then, by looking at your Facebook and LinkedIn accounts, it will determine if anyone has mutual friends or associates. Once a connection is established, the app will check Concur to see where the two of you are going -- perhaps both of you are going to the same conference or staying at the same hotel, so why not split a cab or car rental? Or, if that's not really your thing, you can send your new pal a welcome gift online via MasterCard. The problem is that many travelers prefer to keep to themselves and will balk at the idea that other people can see their travel itinerary, even if both of you know the same people. Fortunately, your information can only be picked up by others if you download the app, opt-in to the service and are connected to Gogo.

Proximity Signage was put together by [NewAer](#), a company that licenses proximity-advertising software to other businesses. As you step off the plane, digital signs will be there to greet you with personalized suggestions on where to go based on your connecting-flight info, along with travel and

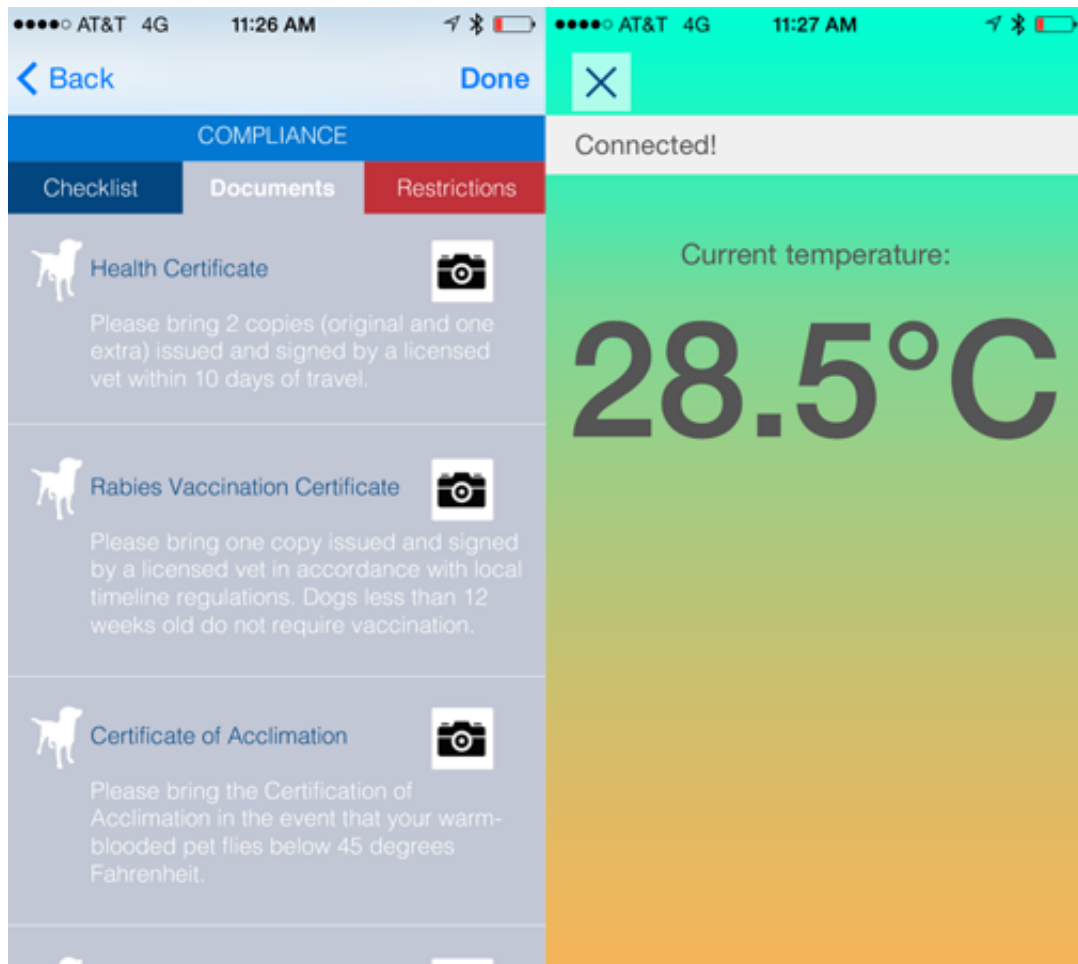
shopping preferences. If you're getting to another flight, the signs provide you with gate information as well as a map and a place to get your favorite coffee along the way; if you're at your final destination, it could tell you how to get to baggage claim or ground transportation. To address privacy concerns, as soon as you walk by the sign, the personal messages are deleted and replaced with a generic screen. (The company said that wearables easily fit into this situation, but no demonstrations took place.)



The company refers to the tech, which is already available to developers, as "reverse iBeacons"; whereas iBeacons ping your phone incessantly whenever you pass by, in this case your phone actually pings the signs and relays profile information. The software can easily be extended to other uses, such as personalized advertising at mall kiosks, file exchanges between mobile devices, automatic check-ins to locations and even unlocking your car.

Finally, if you have pets in the cargo area of the plane, Furry Flyers will be helpful. Embed a sensor into your pet's collar that tracks their location, heart rate, temperature and other conditions. It also includes a handy checklist of your pet's lengthy onboarding process, so you can make sure they'll get on. If the team finds success with the app, it wants to eventually make it possible for you to talk to (and perhaps even see) your dog or cat during the trip. This may put an anxious pet owner at

ease during the flight -- as long as everything is going well for Fluffy. If things take a turn for the worse, well... your travels just became *much* more stressful.



None of these apps are available yet, and some of them may never make it into an app store. But the hackathon served its purpose: It gave developers an opportunity to come up with creative travel-related uses for wearables, Bluetooth beacons and smartphones. As the tech continues to grow in popularity, the more impact these types of events can have. And when it comes to travel, any app that makes life easier is a welcome one.

8 COMMENTS

TAGS: american, americanairlines, android, androidwear, hackathon, ibeacon, ios, mobilepostcross, pebble, sita