‘Girls Around Me’ Developer Defends App After Foursquare Dismissal

By Scott Austin and Andrew Dowell

The developer of a controversial mobile app that used data from Facebook and Foursquare to reveal the location of nearby women defended its intentions Saturday after drawing a firestorm of criticism over privacy concerns.

On Saturday, Foursquare cut off access to the “Girls Around Me” app that made it possible to view the location of women on a map and their publicly available data and photographs from Facebook. Foursquare said the app violated a policy against aggregating information across venues. A number of blogs, led by Cult of Mac, raised questions as to whether the app encourages stalking.

The Russian app developer, i-Free Innovations, fired back with a strongly worded statement sent to The Wall Street Journal, calling it “unethical to pick a scapegoat to talk about the privacy concerns. We see this wave of negative as a serious misunderstanding of the apps’ goals, purpose, abilities and restrictions.”

I-Free said “Girls Around Me” only provides data that is publicly available on Foursquare and Facebook.

Notably, the developer repeatedly made the case that the app’s intention was simply to help people discover public venues nearby. This despite the name of the app, “Girls Around Me,” and the fact that its promos show women in provocative poses.

I-Free said it pulled “Girls Around Me” from Apple’s iTunes store since Foursquare’s decision Saturday rendered the app useless, but it said it will continue development and “limit it to showing only public places and venues.” The app has been downloaded more than 70,000 times.

Here’s the full statement from i-Free to The Wall Street Journal:

Girls Around Me app was designed to make geo-social exploration of popular venues easy and visual.

We follow the geo-social trend for mobile devices that is supported by numerous loca-
tion sharing services, networks and apps. Many other mobile apps provide the same or more extended functionality using location data provided by APIs of major social networks, i.e. Banjo or Sonar.

Girls Around Me does not allow anonymous usage of the app. It is impossible to search for a particular person in this app, or track his or her location. The app just allows the user to browse the venues nearby, as if you passed by and looked in the window. The Girls Around Me user has to be registered in Foursquare and must be logged in this service to be able to see anything in Girls Around Me. The app Girls Around Me does not have access to user login and password, authentication is carried out on the social network side. Girls Around Me shows to the user only the data that is available to him or her through his or her accounts in Foursquare, and gives the user nothing more than Foursquare app can provide itself (when you browse venues around you in Foursquare, you can see how many people checked in there and you can see their profiles and photos, even contacts and social networks profile). The aim of the app is to make the usage of this data more convenient and more focused on finding popular and crowded venues.

Girls Around Me has no ability to change, limit or expand information that is available to the user through his or her account in social network. Girls Around Me does not use any self-developed or third party services to search for extra information apart from the information the users share with others. Girls Around Me does not put together data from different social networks.

The Facebook accounts shown as available to send a message are the accounts that Foursquare users make public in their profiles. Girls Around Me does not allow anonymous usage of the messaging service. We made it perfectly clear that any personal message can only be sent from the user’s account in Facebook (if he or she has one), and it can be done only if messaging is allowed by privacy settings of the recipient user.

The app was out for several months already and has not been promoted in order to first to receive user feedback and address privacy concerns, if necessary. Girls Around Me was downloaded more than 70 000 times. Since the app’s launch we’ve seen numerous positive comments from users who claimed that the app helped them to discover “hot spots” – venues that are popular among girls or boys. Since the apps launch till last Friday nobody ever raised a privacy concern because, again, it is clearly stated that Girls Around Me cannot show the user more data than social network already does.

We understand that privacy is a serious matter. We were planning to continue develop-
ing the app and limit it to showing only public places and venues. We understand that user generated data might not reflect the real public or private user space (a user can indicate his private space as public and vice versa), but we intended to bring our best effort to work on the available APIs to develop filters to limit user access only to public venues shared by other users.

We are absolutely convinced that it is good and important to educate the users to take care of their privacy and what they share publicly. But we believe it is unethical to pick a scapegoat to talk about the privacy concerns. We see this wave of negative as a serious misunderstanding of the apps’ goals, purpose, abilities and restrictions. Girls Around Me does not provide any data that is unavailable to user when he uses his or her social network account, nor does it reveal any data that users did not share with others. The app was intended for facilitating discovering of great public venues nearby. The app was designed to make it easier for a user to step out of door and hang out in the city, find people with common interests and new places to go to.

We have removed the application from the iTunes Store, because the users get repetitive error message, and we feel that until we find a solution and be able to provide full service, we should restrain from acquiring new users. We shall put our best effort to support the apps existing users and address their concerns.

We are working on providing all necessary comments and data to prove our good intentions. We were (and are) making our best efforts to develop an app that fits user expectations without going beyond the restrictions of social networks.