



## ACOUSTIC WANDERING

LET THE SOUND BE YOUR GUIDE.

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**So you're trying to get from here to there but don't have much of a clue about where there is.**

You're not alone. Figuring out how to get from A to B has been an obsession since people realized there was somewhere besides here to be.

The ancients drew lines on the ground and developed rich myths to help them find their nomadic way. Chinese literature refers to mapmaking from the seventh century BC. Ptolemy made profound contributions to the science of cartography that was later expanded upon by Arab astronomers. And Columbus used a neat device called the astrolabe that measured the height of the sun at sea in order to calculate latitude. That technological gizmo got him from Europe to, um, err...the West Indies.

Today we've got satellites, global positioning systems and the topographic certainty of every nook and cranny on Earth. Where that's left us with is a lot of detailed maps to pull out when we're wandering lost and confused. Not the most convenient interface if you want to keep your eyes on what's around you, at least not according to Richard Etter, a 26-year-old graduate student at the Furtwangen University of Applied Science in Cologne, Germany.

The Swiss-born Etter recently prototyped the Melodious Walkabout, an audio-based mapping system that uses common technologies like MP3s, PDAs and GPS to help people find their way. "I was thinking of how to improve navigation," explains Etter about the thesis project that gave birth to the Walkabout.

"Paper maps can be inconvenient, and electronic systems are complicated and have these small displays."

To counter that, Etter developed an acoustic user interface that gives directional audio cues for those who find maps an inconvenience. Take a wireless-enabled PDA with some music on it and you have the basic foundation for a new way to get from here to there.

Etter's Melodious Walkabout takes audio and manipulates it by interacting with global positioning systems. Simply input a destination and throw on some tunes. Directions are handled by panning music left, center and right, and using various audio filters. The result: listen to your favorite mix as the Walkabout guides you to your party.

"It's like a personal DJ that adapts the music to your context,"

Etter explains.

There's no real reason that navigation has to be a purely visual experience—it's just one of those given certainties that we all seem to assume. Kind of like the world being flat. Sure it's a simple premise, but the idea and its realization are nothing short of genius. Why rely on the didactic instructions of a computer-generated voice, when you could have the latest Fabriclive mix lead you to your destination with the simple panning of bass drops?

"Music is emotional, and can be used to convey precise information," Etter claims when describing how those who've tested the Walkabout understand the audio cues within the first few minutes of using the device.

"The challenge," he says, "is to adapt the audio content in a way that is enjoyable and acoustically convenient." That, and to make sure you don't accidentally slip Fatboy's "Right Here, Right Now" into the mix. You'll be circling the block for hours.

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