

New Game Puts Geography on the Map

An online quiz on locations and landmarks is winning millions of fans

By NICK WINGFIELD
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One of the most popular videogames on the Internet right now is about as low-tech as a high-school social studies quiz.




Ray Bartkus

The free game, Traveler IQ Challenge, has become an unlikely hit by getting players to locate Kinshasa, Moscow and other cities and attractions by clicking on a crude, two-dimensional world map, and scoring them based on the speed and accuracy of their responses. Created as a marketing gimmick in June by TravelPod, a

travel Web site owned by Expedia, Traveler IQ now has more than four million people a month who play it on sites across the Internet, including Facebook's popular social network.

Traveler IQ is part of a wave of what's known in the industry as "casual" games -- low budget, easy-to-play titles like card games and puzzles -- that lack the visual flare of slick new products for the Xbox 360 and other game consoles. Traveler IQ is also tapping into a renewed interest in geography, stimulated by new technologies like GPS satellite-based navigation devices and Google Earth, a program from Google that lets users browse a three-dimensional model of the planet.

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[Take a sample Travel IQ test.](#)²



GEO-WHIZZES

A look at the top scoring players this week of Traveler IQ Challenge on Facebook, by college, high school and workplace.

Rank	College Name / Location	Traveler IQ	No. of Players
1	IMD Business School / Lausanne, Switz.	117.33	30
2	Ecole des Mines de Douai / Douai, France	115.49	12
3	Montpellier SupAgro / Montpellier, France	115.48	15
4	Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary / South Hamilton, Mass.	114.90	14
5	École Normale Supérieure / Paris, France	114.38	166

Rank	High School / Location	Traveler IQ	No. of Players
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"I'm addicted," says John Riccitiello, chief executive of videogame publisher Electronic Arts of Redwood City, Calif. Mr. Riccitiello says his overall Traveler IQ ranking got as high as 11th in the world at one time, but his standing dropped as more people began playing the game, sinking to 204,184th. "Once something gets really popular, you realize what a dolt you are," says Mr. Riccitiello, who travels about 175,000 miles a year.

Traveler IQ Challenge was inspired by games played by Luc Levesque, a Canadian programmer and traveler who founded TravelPod. When he was on train trips across Turkey and

1	<i>Montgomery Bell Academy / Nashville, Tenn.</i>	117.54	17
2	<i>Lubbock High School / Lubbock, Tex.</i>	113.52	14
3	<i>Tenaflly High School / Tenaflly, N.J.</i>	110.91	13
4	<i>Lycée Louis le Grand / Paris, France</i>	110.13	61
5	<i>Leysin American School / Leysin, Switzerland</i>	110.06	12

Rank	Workplace	Traveler IQ	No. of Players
1	<i>The Los Angeles Times</i>	119.83	10
2	<i>French Foreign Affairs</i>	119.32	20
3	<i>Agency for International Development (USAID)</i>	118.79	17
4	<i>National Public Radio</i>	117.70	12
5	<i>National Democratic Institute</i>	115.51	47

Source: *Traveler IQ Challenge*

driving for days to reach remote salt flats in Bolivia, Mr. Levesque, 32 years old, would randomly name a country and one of his travel companions would attempt to name another country or capital city that starts with the third letter of the previous country's name.

The idea for an online geography game occurred to Mr. Levesque in May when Facebook of Palo Alto, Calif., opened its site so independent software developers could create games, music and other simple applications that its huge audience could post on their personal Web pages. Two programmers created the game for

TravelPod in just under three weeks for an amount Mr. Levesque won't disclose, but which is likely less than \$30,000 at standard salaries for engineers.

The game was designed to funnel users to TravelPod.com³, an ad-supported Web site that lets travelers set up blogs chronicling their trips. "We've seen huge increases in registrations and traffic," says Mr. Levesque, who adds that the Ottawa, Ontario, company could eventually put ads directly inside the game. More than 1.6 million people have installed the game on their Web pages on Facebook. Most of the players of the game now come through other sites that have the program on their pages, including the CBS show "The Amazing Race."

Traveler IQ starts out asking users to locate some of the better known cities and attractions in the world, like London, giving users a limit of about 10 seconds to pinpoint them on a map. The locations quickly get harder with cities like Ashkabat, Turkmenistan. The game tells users how close, in kilometers, they got to the actual locations and scores them accordingly, with more points awarded for shorter distances.

Andrew Bridges, an attorney at a San Francisco law firm who has traveled extensively around the world, the game is one of a number of new technologies that help stimulate his interest in distant locales. For fun, he says he'll see how fast he can manually zoom in to find a monument like the Acropolis in Athens using Google Earth.

Jerome Dobson, a geographer at the University of Kansas in Lawrence who doesn't play the game, says new technological applications like Traveler IQ are helping to revive geography after a decades-long decline in the teaching the subject in U.S. schools. Issues like climate change, globalization and the war in Iraq are also encouraging interest in far flung places. Mr. Dobson, also the president of the American Geographical Society, an association of geographers and geography enthusiasts, says writer Ambrose Bierce said around the time of World War I that "'War is God's way of teaching Americans geography.'"

Still, studies suggest there's a ways to go before the public improves its grasp of geography. A survey from early last year sponsored by the National Geographic Society found that only half of young American adults, ages 18 to 24, could locate New York state on a map. Six out of 10 couldn't find Iraq on a map of the Middle East.

Travel IQ provides its own report card, of sorts, on geographical skills. Among those who use the game

on Facebook, Tata Consultancy Services, a technology consulting firm based in India, had the lowest average Traveler IQ among workplaces, at least until the rankings were updated during the middle of this week. Mike McCabe, a spokesman for Tata Consultancy Services in the U.S., in an email called the findings "interesting" and said the company will consider them when training its staff, though he said, "Engineering skills and an overall cultural understanding of the company and its customers" are higher priorities at Tata than geography.

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