Students' prototype app finds relatives among your Mormon Facebook friends

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Many people already know the joy of discovering their ancestors, and now a new app by BYU students takes it to the next level - finding which of your Facebook friends are also family.

The group of computer science students developed a Facebook app called "Relative Finder."

Most other genealogical Facebook applications are based only on your living family and at best can connect you with third or fourth cousins.

The Relative Finder app goes back an average of nine or ten generations because it connects to the genealogical information BYU obtained for members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

It can even show you your relationship to famous historical figures like the signers of the Declaration of the Independence, apostles and prophets from the early days of the restored church, American presidents and many more.

Born to an Irish father and a French mother, BYU student Mike Nelson grew up with a wealth of diverse family history. Not only does the app honor his heritage, it serves as his honors thesis for a degree he's completing in computer science under the mentorship of Professor Tom Sederberg.

"I find it personally interesting to see how we are interrelated, especially with those I didn't think I was related to," Nelson said. "It's worth talking about and sharing by Facebook."

Nelson had recently started his major in computer science in 2009 when he applied for a position under Sederberg. Within a year, he developed the application and was awarded first place in the Computer Science Department's 2009 Capstone Demo Day. He also presented at the 2011 Family History Technology Workshop in Salt Lake City.

"I had heard from one of my professors that Dr. Sederberg was looking for research assistants in a family history project," Nelson said. "I needed a reason for him to hire me for the summer, so I pitched the idea of having a Facebook app."

At the time, Sederberg and his students had engineered and managed the Relative Finder website, which Sederberg wrote 15 years prior when he was called to be the family history consultant in his ward.

"The Facebook application was entirely Mike's idea. He knew that Facebook is the way the current generation prefers to act and he thought it would stimulate interest in genealogy," Sederberg said. "It turned out to be pretty fortunate that we already developed Relative Finder. It just clicked."

Through the course of learning two programming languages, Nelson started writing the communication between Facebook, Relative Finder and the FamilySearch. The combination of the three gives Facebook users a quicker, more accessible way to find relatives between Mormon friends – especially those who have Utah heritage.

Church members with a registered account at new.FamilySearch.org can use the Relative Finder application and invite other member friends to join in the [family history](#) process. Go to apps.facebook.com/relativefinder to start.

More than a dozen other undergraduate computer science students have been involved in developing Relative Finder. The relativefinder.org website, currently managed by undergraduate Willard Hagen, can be used without Facebook to determine how members of a ward or class are related to each other.

Provided by Brigham Young University