

Review: No real point to Foursquare, yet addictive

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This screen shot shows the Foursquare mobile site. Foursquare is a social network that lets you tell friends and family where you are. Through the smartphone app, you broadcast your whereabouts, or "check in" to those places. (AP Photo/Foursquare)

(AP) -- It took a return to the South to get me back on Foursquare. Months later, I'm still not sure why I need it, yet I can't seem to stay away.

Foursquare, of course, is a social network that lets you tell friends and

family where you are - whether it's a bar, a park or an airport. Through a [smartphone](#) app, you broadcast your whereabouts, or "check in" to those places.

Until I began my break from Foursquare about 15 months ago, I was diligent about checking in to places, mostly around my home in New York.

Friends made fun of me for taking Foursquare so seriously. I even stopped several times during a half marathon in Brooklyn to post my whereabouts, until I saw walkers starting to pass me.

I got points for checking in and competed with friends and strangers for bragging rights - and that's really all it's about. If I checked in to, say, a drug store more often than others on Foursquare, I'd become "mayor" of the venue, at least until someone dethroned me by checking in even more often. Foursquare also awarded badges for such milestones as visiting five airports or going out four nights in a row. It was all exciting.

And then it wasn't.

On Feb. 13, 2011, I checked in to Pat O'Brien's on New Orleans' Bourbon Street after indulging on its specialty drink, the Hurricane. A friend grabbed my phone to add, "Having the time (of) my life."

I didn't know it at the time, but that would be my last check-in for 11 months. Restaurants and laundry facilities I frequent in New York suddenly seemed routine and boring. I began asking myself, "What is the point of Foursquare?"

I decided to give Foursquare another shot during a visit four months ago to Texas, Arkansas, Mississippi and Louisiana. It wasn't likely that I'd be back there anytime soon. I figured it was now or never.

My Foursquare obsession quickly returned.

In the time I was away from Foursquare, the service made a bunch of changes. There are now more opportunities to earn points - I got three simply for checking in on Martin Luther King Day and four for visiting new states. An "Explore" feature offers recommendations based on where you and your friends have already been. I don't know what Foursquare was trying to tell me, but many of those recommendations seemed to steer me to more places to eat.

Foursquare also got better at offering deals simply for checking in. Sadly, I missed a 10 percent "Newbie Special" discount at Zoes Kitchen in Houston because I didn't check in until I had already placed and paid for a food order.

My 43 check-ins as part of that trip gave me 306 points, nearly three times the 109 points earned by a co-worker and closest competitor. She was in California at the time and hadn't been as aggressive as I was about checking in. I managed to check in separately to a rental car center, a shuttle bus, a food court and Gate E3 at George Bush Intercontinental Airport, for instance. I became mayor of two hotels and earned badges for visiting enough airports and movie theaters.

The bigger test was whether I could maintain that interest once I returned to my routines back in New York.

I still struggled with the question of what Foursquare offers beyond its novelty.

Deals are certainly an enticement, but I have yet to qualify for one. Many of the ones I saw were in partnership with American Express and required having and using its credit card. One participating Chinese restaurant didn't even know it was being offered. A brunch place that

supposedly offered the deal was "cash only," so there was no way I could have claimed it, even if I had an American Express card.

The "Explore" feature could come in handy when I'm looking for ideas. I searched for lunch options one day and got 30 recommendations from Foursquare, but many of them were too far for my half-hour lunch break. By contrast, Yelp's reviews service offered places that were much closer, along with options to narrow the list based on price and type of cuisine.

Foursquare lets users share tips on particular venues, and I've occasionally found those useful. In Little Rock, Ark., one user's tip steered me toward calzone over pizza, and my taste buds were very appreciative. But in New York, there's sometimes too much junk among the tips. At LaGuardia Airport, the top "tip" was a joke from The Onion and the second one was a link to an opinion column on airport security. The joke wasn't even funny. Just tell me how to find the bus to Manhattan!

I've also found it difficult to pull up the places I wanted to check in to. I'm used to Google making spelling corrections for me and even suggesting searches as I type the first few letters. No wonder I kept missing specials. My fingers weren't precise enough to let me finish checking in and viewing deals before the takeout staffer asked for my order.

Foursquare recently added other features, such as opening hours for local merchants and price guides for restaurants, but that's already available through Yelp, which does a better job of curating listings to weed out duplicates. Facebook also has a check-in feature now, and that's where most of my friends do it.

So why do I bother with Foursquare? You'd think that list of annoyances

gives me enough reason to stay away.

Occasionally, Foursquare gives me a good chuckle. A search once popped up the fictional Room of Requirement from the "Harry Potter" books and movies. Someone created "incompetence" as a venue for a local commuter transit agency; 54 people had checked in 71 times the last time I checked.

And were it not for Foursquare bonus points, I wouldn't have remembered Pi Day on March 14.

There's no good answer to "What's the point?" but that can be said about much of the Internet.

I've found myself choosing takeout places based on how close I was to becoming mayor.

To me, Foursquare remains a novelty, a game and a good way to pass the time waiting for the bus or a meal to arrive. It offers an instant record of where I've been and when. If I forget to check in, it's as if I'd never been there.

[Foursquare](#) doesn't need to be more than that.

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