Great iPhone User Experience Design: Hotel Tonight - Task Based Design In Action

It is easier to point out flaws than to identify excellence. It is tempting to boast our own skills by looking down our nose at the work of others. Often times it is much more challenging (and humbling) to find a great design and identify what makes it great. In this post, I would like to review an iPhone app called Hotel Tonight and explain why its use of task-based design has put it on my list of great iPhone apps.

WHAT IS IT?

Hotel Tonight is native iPhone application designed to help weary travelers find discount hotel rates in their area. It was released in 2010, has over 4 million downloads and is free for users.

WHAT DOES IT DO?

Everyday at noon the application posts vacant hotel rooms in the user's area. Empty hotel rooms are a hotel's worst enemy, so they are willing to give deals on last minute bookings to fill their vacancies. Once the list is populated, users are able to browse the available rooms and quickly book a room in the application.

WHY THIS IS A GREAT DESIGN?

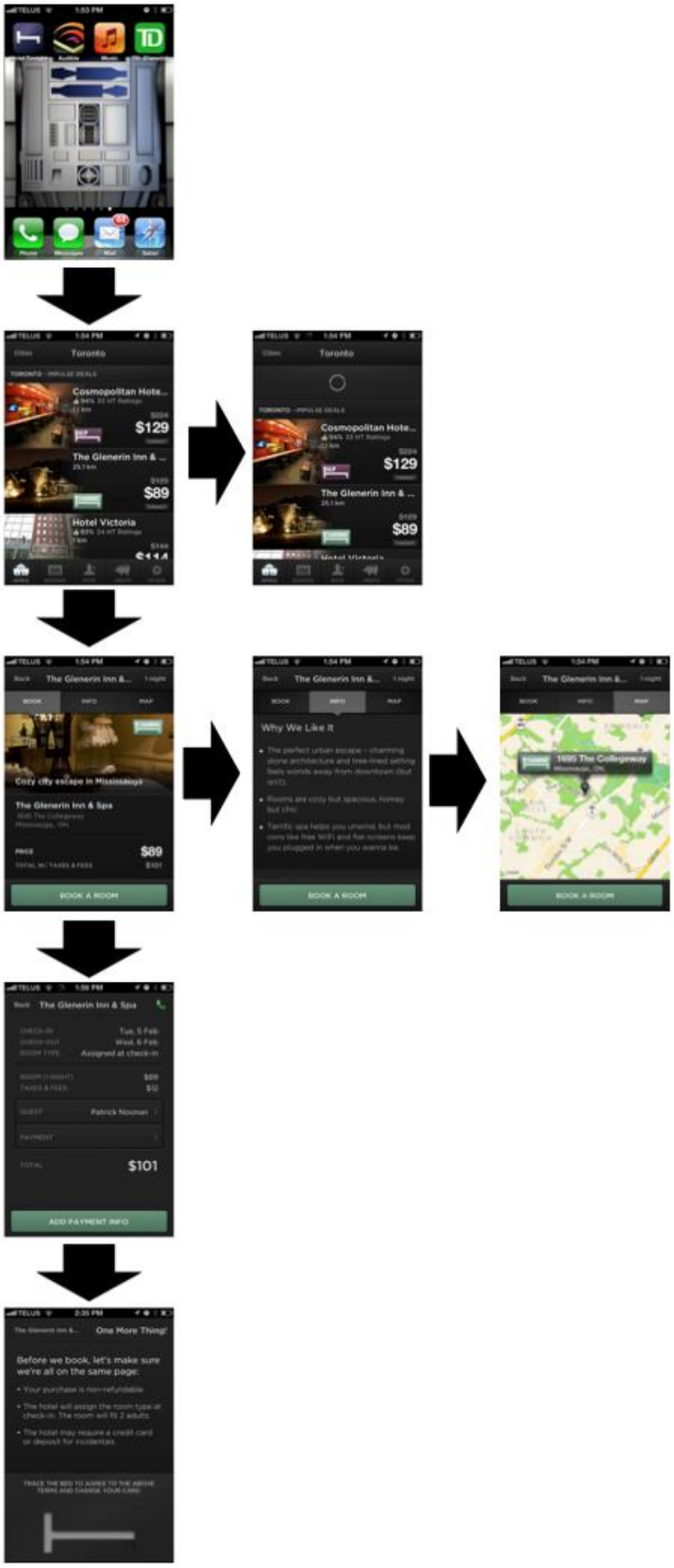
This is an application that was designed with a specific task in mind. Task-based design is central to all good user experience design bus is even more important when designing for mobile. With limited screen space and unpredictable context, it is critical to pave a direct path through the task at hand.

The task in this case is simple: find a hotel in my area for tonight. As soon as the user touches the icon, the application assumes the user has this task in mind. It automatically accesses the GPS location and shows selections in that area. Within 4 clicks (including starting the app) the user is ready to confirm the booking. The final step has the user trace the company logo to confirm their booking (bonus points for fun factor).

There is additional navigation to allow users access additional tasks. Booking receipts, a share feature that provides discounts for successful recommendations, credit recorder, and user options are all available at the bottom of the landing screen in traditional iOS style. Once the user starts their primary task (booking a room), this navigation disappears, helping the user focus on their task. **Overall the design is clean, adheres to iOS design patterns, and has plenty of contingencies for user error.**

To me, the thing that makes this application stand out the most is the attention to the context of the user. When considering context in user experience design, things like environmental noise and the probability of being interrupted during the task are the usual suspects. When designing for mobile though, context goes beyond considering distractions and needs to encompass the whole usage scenario. In this case, the scenario might be a salesperson who, after a 4-hour meeting on a business trip, checked their flight status only to find their flight that night had been delayed until the next day. Now they are in a strange city and need a place to stay that night. They do not care about doing comparison-shopping, they just want a room and they want it fast.

To accommodate this need, the app only provides a limited selection of hotels (5-8) that have been handpicked by the Hotel Tonight staff. It seems strange that drastically limiting the number of options would improve value, but based on the usage scenario above, you can see how reducing the number hotels helps the user complete their task. There is also no need for filtering, searching, or side-by-side comparison. The bold exclusion of unnecessary features throughout this application leads to an exceptionally polished and directive look and feel. This app immediately satisfies the specific purpose for which it was designed and the design communicates that purpose clearly and elegantly. That's what makes this a great iPhone App.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