Young researcher contributes to Open Mobile Consortium

Bryan McAlister, a researcher from the human language technologies research group at the Meraka Institute of the CSIR, has been invited to become part of the soon-to-be-renamed Open Mobile Consortium (OMC). This international initiative hosted by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), aims at creating a common, open space for the development of SMS (or text messaging *via* cell phones) and mobile telecommunications applications for the developing world.

Brian McAlister

The idea behind the OMC, which emerged from the latest MobileActive conference with Robert Kirkpatrick of InSTEDD as chair, is that it should bring together technical experts in the field of mobile communications software to allow them to collaborate, for example, to identify existing open source mobile communications software packages; collaborate to enhance the existing software; and identify and fill gaps in functionality.

McAlister is currently working on a mobile communications software package. This software was originally developed under the MobilED project, which makes use of mobile technologies and services for formal and informal learning. He explains, "My current involvement in the OMC is to represent the MobilED core software. This is currently being achieved by online collaboration on the web with other communication software developers around the world."

The MobilED core is essentially a convenience layer that sits on top of the Asterisk software PBX (private branch exchange — a dedicated telephone exchange, in this case for MobilED), as well as Kannel (a text or SMS gateway, which allows access to another computer). The core enables IVR (interactive voice response) application development in the Python programming language, and the creation of applications that combine SMS and IVR communication. For example, SMS request messages can be received, resulting in an IVR call-back to the SMS's originating number with the requested information.

Additional development was done on the MobilEd core by the HLT team on the OpenPhone and Lwazi projects. McAlister explains, "We essentially added an IVR application scripting module to make it simple for application developers to create IVR applications, and also improved on the software's overall stability and robustness. The software is currently being used in the Openphone HIV helpline pilot and the National Accessibility Portal (NAP 3) platform, and will be used next year in the Lwazi telephony information service pilots."