

Internet as an Entertainment Media

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Introduction

What began as ARPANET, a network for the U.S military, soon became the “*Internet*”, a huge network of computers that covered most parts of the world. Initially, the setup largely consisted of Fiber Optic (or other broadband like co-axial) cables connecting major nodes, which in turn used the telephone network of the area, to reach (potentially) every house. This phase largely involved the usage of Internet as a “*source of information*”. Most data was text (and images, with the conception of graphical browsers) and the speed was typically 28.8 Kbps or 56.6 Kbps. Audio and Video elements were present, but were of low quality, and downloading these files (which are considerably larger than text) was a painstaking process.

The last 2-3 years has seen a dramatic change in the nature of the Internet. The low-bandwidth telephone cable networks are fast being replaced with high bandwidth co-axial/ fiber optic networks. Although “*Broadband*” was initially restricted to universities, government agencies and the rich due to exorbitant costs, it is now affordable enough for an average income household to afford. The Internet is still mainly used as a source of information, but high speeds (128 Kbps, 1 Mbps, 10 Mbps) have enabled a surge in Audio, Video and other computer based multimedia element that are typical ingredients that go into an entertainment project. This has enabled the addition of a whole new dimension to usage of Internet.

Internet as an Entertainment Media

Media has been a major source of entertainment in the last century. The conventional media that have been used for entertainment are:

1. Books/ Magazines/ Tabloids
2. Radio
3. Television/ Films
4. Video Games

The Internet as an Entertainment media is not a class by itself, but rather a unique interaction of all of the above media. Computer based systems have been used as an entertainment medium in the form of Video games, CD-ROM's (now DVD's), which are by itself an interaction of the different classes of media; hence the term "Multimedia". But most of them are restricted to two, at the most few people interacting together at a time. The most unique feature of the Internet is its 'reach' and 'interaction'. Eighty Percent of all Americans access the Internet in any location (Arbitron/ Edison media research, 2003). Home access of Internet has now increased to 67% in U.S.A (in July 2003) from 37% in July 1999 (Arbitron/ Edison media research, 2003). The ability to interact with someone across the globe is certainly exciting. The 'programming' capability of the computer is another important factor that adds to the novelty of the Internet. Programs such as Macromedia Flash incorporate elements of audio, video and animation; all of which can be 'programmed'.

When the factors discussed above are applied to the conventional media, there is a potential of a whole new breed of products. These products will essentially contain traditional media such as Audio, Video (and Text) interacting in an untraditional manner. This is apart from the fact that each of the traditional media can by themselves be represented online. Online books/newspapers/tabloids, online radio, online television, online films/ trailers and online games are commonplace now. But the power of the Internet will be fully exploited only when the media are combined in a way that takes maximum advantage of its nature.

The Internet is also capable of replicating entertainment that is not typically media based. Online versions of conventional games like word games like Scrabble, Crosswords, Word-Power; card games like Bridge and some other games like Chess, Gambling are some simple yet exciting adaptations. These games take full advantage of the inherent nature of the medium. There have been talks of an online game where real mysteries are uploaded in a multimedia format; the case would be open for people all around the world to experience and solve. Such is the power of the medium.

Another very interesting development is that of “Infotainment”. Although this is not directly a consequence of the Internet, but has definitely added to its value. Online encyclopedias for example, have much more value than if they were on a CD; we would always have access to the latest developments.

The biggest limitation of the Internet as an entertainment media is still speed (and consequently quality). The coming of Broadband has had a major impact, but the speeds cannot still be compared to some other new media like DVD's. The future of the Internet as an entertainment media largely depends upon future data transfer rates. Recently, Scientists at the Stanford Linear Accelerator Center used fiber-optic cables to transfer 6.7 gigabytes of data, the equivalent of two DVD movies across 6,800 miles in less than a minute at a phenomenal speed of 923 Mbps. If that is any indication to go by, we are not far from a revolution.

The Broadband Effect

Broadband is certainly the single largest factor in the growth of the Internet as an entertainment media. The number of Americans with residential broadband Internet access has grown from 7% in January 2003 to 21% in July 2003 (Arbitron/ Edison media research, 2003). The plateau is yet to come, with 16% of Americans with dial-up access at home planning to switch to broadband within the next twelve months (Arbitron/ Edison media research, 2003). Americans are also spending an increasing amount of time online everyday. The average time spent online as of July 2003 is 63 minutes, while the average time spent in July 2001 was 41 minutes (Arbitron/ Edison media research, 2003).

People with residential broadband spend more time with the Internet and less time with other media than people who live in homes with dial-up access. The chart below shows the typical time spent with each media (Arbitron/ Edison media research, 2003).

Media time spent daily (<i>Base: Internet access from home</i>)		
	Dial Up	Broadband
T.V	3:03	2:45
Radio	2:23	2:23
Internet	0:40	0:23
Newspaper	1:16	2:00

Two facts are very clear. The reach of broadband is growing and so is the time spent online (at the cost of other media). An estimated 35% of all Americans have tried streaming audio or video (Arbitron/ Edison media research, 2002). Movie trailers and previews followed by Music Videos are the two largest categories of video streamed by Internet users. 62% of all people who have watched video on the Internet have watched movie trailers/ previews. The figure stands at 52% for music videos (Arbitron/ Edison media research, 2002). This is a clear indication that the viewers are now ready for the Internet as an entertainment media.

There is tremendous scope for the Internet as an entertainment media because it is only a superset (in terms of capabilities) of the conventional media, the data transfer speed being the only factor against it. Consequently, as the transfer rates increase, the importance of Internet as an entertainment media will increase.

Maximizing Innovation

When the Internet is used as an information source, the content is very clearly defined by the audience and purpose of the website. One more important feature of the Internet as an information source is that the cognitive load of the user should be as low as possible. The user should take minimum time to understand the structure, navigation and the content of the website. However, when viewed as an entertainment media, it tends to imitate conventional media. The first issue largely depends on the creator of the project. The content could define the audience or alternatively, the intended audience could define the content. Both approaches have been used in Television (Blumer, 1986). This statement is true for other media too (including the Internet). The cognitive load does not have to be kept at the minimum possible level. Although some media projects have (and require) low cognitive load, the same is not true for video games and certain genres of books, films etc.

The three major aspects in any media are:

1. Content
2. Elements of form (Technical aspects)
3. Interaction of form and content

The triad recognizes the impossibility of separating content and form in an analysis of mediated messages (Albers, 1991)

Content is largely independent of the media used (although content may have maximum effect in one particular media or may sometimes even be unsuitable in some). The Elements of form depend on the nature of media and thus, in-depth understanding of the media is of critical importance. The defining factor in developing projects for the Internet as is “Unknown”. The developer has to deal with a lot of unknowns namely:

1. Unknown connection speed
2. Unknown user preferences
3. Unknown platforms
4. Unknown browsers
5. Unknown user settings
6. Unknown window size and monitor resolution
7. Unknown colors

(Niederst, 2003)

The most important factor in any multimedia project is however ‘Interaction’. Interaction between the form and content on one hand and interaction between the various elements of the project on the other. Any content is invariably altered by its passage through a medium. Thus form and content taken separately do not provide a complete picture of the effectiveness or quality of a project. It is often in the interactivity of form and content that ‘art’ or ‘creativity’ occurs (Albers, 1991).

Zev Braun and Bochko mention in interviews conducted by Albers (1991), (about television) that for a quality product, the sum total of all the elements should be greater than its parts. There is a gestalt. The same is only more relevant in the case of Multimedia projects. The project could have excellent Video, Audio and Programming; but as long as these elements do not interact effectively, the overall project would be pedestrian.

Conclusion

The coming of broadband has not only led to the Internet joining the 'mainstream' media, but has also led to the emergence of the Internet as an entertainment media. This field is still in its infancy and as networking and programming capabilities continue to improve at a rapid rate, the possibilities are limitless. We will continue to witness the growth of the Internet as an entertainment media. New and innovative forms of entertainment will be developed that will take maximum advantage of its inherent nature.

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