

Chapter 3.20

Online Video as a Social Activity

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ABSTRACT

Online video is one of the Internet's most popular services. In addition to entertainment, it can provide a social experience. This chapter describes several design decisions related to incorporating a live chat feature alongside online video, and how these decisions could influence the entertainment and social dimensions of the viewing experience. Two laboratory studies explore issues of distraction, entertainment and sociability when integrating live chat with online video. Surprisingly, these studies show that despite being distracting, chat with video can be enjoyable

and sociable. Researchers and practitioners need to explore the generality of this finding both for different genres of content and interaction media and for small and large viewing audiences. The chapter concludes by looking at new models for online video and chat and the implications of those models on sociability.

DESIGNING SOCIAL ONLINE VIDEO EXPERIENCES

The Internet is a highly engaging medium. People from all over the world use the Internet not only to have fun but also to get information about

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everything from dog training to football scores to health issues. But the Internet is not only an information medium – it also enables people to socialize, both in real time and asynchronously. These social interactions take place in thousands of online communities – networked spaces where people having a shared interest or relationship gather together. In this chapter, I demonstrate that online video is not just about being entertained or keeping informed; rather, by combining video with interactive communication, such as text chat, online video can be a social experience as well. I also discuss several technologies used to power online video and their implications for sociability.

Why Make Online Video Social?

Currently, most video content is watched on the television. For those who watch with others, television can be a companionable activity, as when a group of friends get together to watch the latest episode of *Lost*, a Netflix movie, or the Super Bowl. Television content often facilitates conversations, both in the real world and online (Baym, 1999; Brown & Barkhuus, 2006). However, watching television alone is an isolating experience (Putnam, 1995). Watching alone is usually done at home and precludes getting out and socializing with people. Watching television alone may also induce passivity and discourage people from thinking critically about important issues (Postman, 1986). Online video, which reaches far beyond the living room, could overcome this social isolation and stimulate conversation among those who are watching. Indeed, interaction drives the liking of others (cf. Cartwright & Zander, 1953; McKenna et al., 2002; Utz, 2003) and synchronous interaction is associated with increased levels of intimacy (Powazek, 2002). Potentially, communities of viewers could engage and interact while watching videos online. Oumard et al. (2008) conclude that heavy Internet video users are already integrating online video as part of their daily television watching, and are

watching, discussing and sharing video content with their friends. Providing viewers with a chat feature may turn their experience into one that is not only entertaining but also socially engaging.

However, this optimistic vision of viewers socializing while watching videos online runs into a fundamental problem: watching and chatting are two separate activities. Watching a video and socializing both require attention and mental processing, which are limited cognitive resources. Thus, watching a video and chatting with others can be distracting and unpleasant; this is one reason why movie theatres remind people to turn off their cell phones and not talk during the show. When your friend does talk during the movie, it is difficult to follow both the on-screen dialogue and what your friend is saying. In this case, you may miss part of the video (by attending to your friend) or what your friend is saying (by ignoring him or her). Either way, this is likely to cause a decrement in the entertainment value of the movie (if you missed part of it) or in the social experience of watching with others (if you ignored your friend). Keeping this element of distractibility from spoiling the experience is a major design challenge for combining chat with online video.

This chapter asks whether online video with chat can provide a context for positive social interaction, or whether the attentional demands of watching a video and simultaneously chatting with others presents an insurmountable barrier to a satisfactory experience. I present results from two laboratory studies conducted at Carnegie Mellon University. The first experiment establishes that watching online video with chat is distracting, and measures how distracting it is. The second shows that watching and chatting are compatible activities (for the short, entertainment-focused videos we used) and this combination may be useful for building and promoting online video communities. This research is a start at informing the design of online video sites that wish to provide both entertainment and social value to their viewers.

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