

A Short Detour on the Information Highway

By David Polinchock

It all started with an article in *The Standard* called “Hollywood Prepares to Fight File-Swappers about Hollywood.” According to writer Laura Rich, “The threat is the specter of a new Napster-like sensation that would make it easy for Internet users to bypass the studios and to view and swap movies for free. No service with such wide appeal looms – yet – but studio executives have been studying the music industry’s experience with file-swapping services such as Napster. And while no one will say it out loud, privately they admit they’re terrified Hollywood will be Napsterized: that some college kid will post a movie-swapping program that will explode in popularity, swiftly creating a ravenous audience of millions of users who will expect free access to Hollywood blockbusters.” The subheading screamed “Why go to the movie theatre when you can download the flick for free!”

Well, that’s a simple question with a simple answer. When my wife considers sitting on the couch watching a rented video and eating microwaved popcorn *a date*. When the experience of downloading a flick at home is the same as the experience of going to the movie theatre. And I’m not just speaking about getting a better home projection or sound system. In other words, not anytime soon.

Seeing first-run movies is a horse of a different color (immortalized, of course, in a movie: *The Wizard of Oz*). Viewing the movie is just one piece of the entire experience. It’s the Sno-Caps (let’s face it, without movie theatres, we wouldn’t eat Sno-Caps at all!) and the theatre itself (especially in the Barcalounger-like stadium seating). And don’t forget the popcorn: I don’t consider it a movie-going experience if I haven’t had popcorn and butter. I’ve gotten to the movies after having just eaten a full big meal and yet I’ll still find a way to eat a big bag of popcorn. In fact, one night when my wife and I decided to stay at *home* and rent videos, I went to the movie theatre a few blocks from our house, *bought* popcorn from them and then carried it home for our video rental night!

(By the way, she still didn’t consider it a date.)

It’s also a social experience. It’s something that we usually do with someone else. It’s the pre-planning of what to see, the decision between entertainment (action? special effects?) and art (subtitles?). And, it’s the post-show: a cuppa something, somewhere; the discussion of the film, and, of course, the inevitable “maybe we shoulda seen...” It will take a heck of a lot more than file-swapping capabilities to change that.

Despite the potential Napster-like concerns for Hollywood, the fact is the experiences of listening to music and viewing a first run movie are completely different. A great deal of music listening is done on an individual or small group basis. We listen in our cars, at our offices while we work, while working out and, of course, at parties with our friends. With film, it’s the age-old “sitting in a darkened room with 300 other people” event, laughing, crying and mentally beating the tar out of the guy who absolutely believes his cell phone conversation is incredibly important.

In the tech world that we live in today, we have a tendency to get all caught up in what *can* be delivered while loosing sight of what the experience is supposed to be. There’s a huge amount of discussion today about how rich media will save the online advertising industry, but no one is talking about the fact that the online advertising industry is having problems because of the poor quality of online advertising. It doesn’t add to the online experience at all. It interferes, distracts and rarely gives us valuable information. It’s a bad experience! It rarely compels any word of mouth advertising other than “why do we have to put up with this stuff?”

When I started in high tech in 1991, it was with head-mounted display virtual reality. I actually had conversations with people about whether or not VR would replace real-life experiences. In 1994 and 1995, people feared that the Internet would create that same issue—you could live in “virtual communities” and never really interact with real humans. ▶

Come on! In the years I've been a member of the New York New Media Association, a group of people who develop the technologies and content for these virtual communities, I've never gone to so many cocktail parties in my life! It's all we do! We can't wait to get out of our offices and out into someplace to have a drink and speak face to face! We *need* that experience.

If you speak to tech savvy folks, experiences become these massive things, costing tens of millions of dollars. Need someone to greet the guest? Well, use the latest in "Synthetic Humans," complete with voice recognition hardware, speech synthesis capabilities and a database of thousands of responses! I just went to my first grocery store that had the self-service check out system. If you haven't seen this system, it's pretty cool. Even my wife, who doesn't get as excited about all of this new technology as I do, had a great time with this system. But you know what? I know the grocery store will use this as a chance to fire staff, rather than figure out other ways to use people—not unlike ATM machines, which were originally marketed by banks in terms of the cost savings that would be passed on to customers. Now they're charging for ATM withdrawals—and deposits. No matter how cool this system is, it will never replace a great cashier who knows how to say hi and make you really enjoy your shopping experience.

Regardless of whether we're talking on-line, as in the Internet, or on-line as in standing behind the stanchions waiting to get in, it's the elbow rubbing experience of actually interacting with others that will continue to win out, especially in terms of the free-spending target market of the 18 to 24 year old. While you might be able to meet someone in a chat room, sooner or later, you're gonna have to meet face to face if the relationship is going to go anywhere. And most likely, you're going to go to a movie somewhere along the mating trail.

Recently, there was a commercial on TV about a new product from Pillsbury where the cookies are all ready for you to just place on the cookie sheets and bake. As soon as the commercial ended, my wife asked "What's the point of that if you can't get your fingers all gooey from mixing things?" Even though there are those of you reading this who will point out your obsession with eating the dough, regardless of whether it's scratch-made or store bought there's an important point to remember here: in our rush to create new things from old, we sometimes forget we're getting rid of the experiences that we cherished. The quality of the experience should always outweigh the time saved.

