CHAPTER 10

THAT’S ENTERTAINMENT!

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Motivation for the Project

What kind of entertainment do people want from a web site on art and culture? And what is the appropriate context of use for people to enjoy entertainment on the Web? Is this an individual activity or one that would be most engaging if it occurred in a social context? And would people like to do this in multiple locations, for example, at home, work and on the road? At this time, there really is no Web experience similar to the most common entertainment activity, namely, watching TV (Vogel, 1998). In this chapter, we present our experience in developing an entertainment web site for art and culture where the user-centred design (UCD) process led us to the design of TV-like, streaming, multimedia experiences delivered over the Web and similar to TV documentaries, but enriched by hotlinks enabling user control of the experience and access to extra content. The “less clicking, more watching” design approach that emerged through the research is in contrast to the prevailing notion that entertainment on the Web must be highly interactive and participatory as in the model for video games and chat rooms. Although almost one-half of Internet users spent some time with other members of their household every week (Cole, 2000), there are few online entertainment opportunities appropriate for such group experiences. We explored this possibility by testing individual as well as small group use of the Web entertainment prototypes. The chapter begins with a brief discussion of the entertainment concept, followed by a description of the UCD process through which the design emerged for the initial prototype, discussion of the usability testing of the enriched prototypes, and a discussion of the lessons learned about the research topic and the methods employed to address it.

1.2 Entertainment on the Web

Many traditional forms of entertainment such as talking, reading, listening to music, watching movies and TV, playing sports and games, shopping, cooking, gardening,
eating, drinking, visiting museums, attending cultural events have their counterparts on the web. Talking and gossiping have a forum in electronic chat rooms; reading news on the web is becoming increasingly popular; the previously solitary video-game experience has found new meaning in the networked game era; and shopping has gigantic proportions on the web, newly augmented by the thrills of on-line auction.

As stated previously, our research examines possible web counterparts for a TV-like experience, i.e., web-based “watchable” entertainment experiences provided on the screen of a desktop or laptop computer. Currently, few web sites have experienced success in this arena, and those that have are of limited scope (The Economist, 2000). The best examples are sites featuring animated cartoons, often based on parody, such as Joe Cartoon (www.joecartoon.com); sites that show short films, previews, and commercials such as Atom Films (www.atomfilms.com); and the “web cam” phenomenon.

The three most common explanations for this shortage of options are the lack of bandwidth for video; the inadequacy of the desktop sitting position; and the need of interactivity in web entertainment (The Economist, 2000). However, networked video games have shown that the first two problems are not enough to deter entertainment: pre-downloading and local computer graphics rendering can deal with bandwidth problems, and people seem to sit forever in front of video-games.

So, if interactivity is the defining component of web experiences, then the concept of a “watchable”, TV-like web experience is a contradiction in terms. In fact, throughout the development of this project, web designers repeatedly told us that people are entertained by computers only when actively interacting with the content (see also Murray, 1997). This belief is strengthened by the repetitive failures of the traditional entertainment industry to create web entertainment. The first cycle, fuelled by the success of the “The Spot” (www.spot.com) and by the MIT Media Lab advocating interactive TV, failed spectacularly in 1997 both for Microsoft and AOL (see Gierland and Sonesh-Kedar, 1999). The dot.com phenomenon of 1999/2000 spurred a new wave of projects that also ended mostly in failure, particularly in the case of Steven Spielberg’s www.pop.com, the Digital Entertainment Network, and Pseudo (www.pseudo.com) (Red Herring, 2000; The Economist, 2000). The opposite model, making TV into a web device, has also mostly failed, notably in the case of WebTV (The Economist, 2000).

Does that mean “…the Internet will not be the main vehicle for electronic entertainment…” (The Economist, 2000, pg. 32)? Although we do not have a definitive answer to this question, our work in the e-culture project, described in the remainder of this chapter, suggests that people not only want and like to watch TV-like web experiences, but also that those experiences may be significantly different from both traditional TV viewing and web-surfing.