

Is portable video next elephant in the room?

by Jonathan Sidener

When I was in college, the local newspaper employed a veteran baseball writer fond of commingling his analogies. This guy didn't just mix metaphors; he sliced, diced, chopped and tossed them in a light vinaigrette.

In a single paragraph, the local National League team could be compared to a steamroller, a shooting star and a punch-drunk fighter. On a really good day, it could happen in a single sentence.

I was reminded of the old scribe recently, when the buzz around digital video sent me careening down my own purple-prose highway.

I was trying to decide whether downloadable video was like the proverbial 500-pound gorilla who sits anywhere he wants, or like the guy in the apartment upstairs with one bare foot who leaves you waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Pardon the mangled metaphor, but I'm going with both: It's a 500-pound gorilla living upstairs who's due to drop another shoe any minute now. Imagine the size shoe that a 500-pound gorilla wears. It should be a really big thud.

YouTube, the poster child for digital video, is in the news almost every day. YouTube vs. Viacom. YouTube vs. the NFL. YouTube vs. spoon-bending psychic Uri Geller.

That's just from the legal front, from one recent week and the mainstream media. Think of all the YouTube links bouncing around the Internet. Have you seen the iPhone in a blender? Someone sent me that the other day.

Speaking of the iPhone, YouTube landed prime real estate on the portable media player's main screen. And then shortly after the iPhone's debut, LG Electronics announced a deal to include YouTube video access on its phones.

Not long after that, Casio announced it will build in YouTube mode and include special software on some of its video-capable cameras to make it easier to shoot and upload YouTube videos.

And then Helio said it, too, was putting a YouTube link on its phones.

It's everywhere. And it can sit pretty much anywhere it wants.

Some pretty smart money, including Apple, Sony, Nokia, Motorola, Sprint, Verizon and everyone else in the cell phone world, is betting that portable video - the ability to download and carry your clips with you - is the next big thing.

But there's another video frontier - movies on demand - with another set of heavy hitters. Microsoft, Amazon, NetFlix and Apple back the idea that people will use the Internet to buy and rent movies. The relatively new movie sites from these companies join Cinemanow and Movielink, which have been awaiting the movies-on-demand revolution since 1999 and 2002, respectively.

Downloadable Hollywood has been getting its share of headlines. Recently at the E3 Media & Business Summit, two video game divisions made significant announcements about movie services.

Microsoft has enjoyed double-digit growth in movie rentals in the first months they've been offered through the Xbox Live service. At E3, Microsoft said it had signed a deal to offer Disney movies, which should broaden the appeal beyond traditional gamers.

Sony, which owns a hefty movie catalog in addition to claiming its own toehold in the living room, confirmed that it will launch a movie-download service.

Digital video today is reminiscent of the era of Grokster, Napster and MP3.com, when the air also was full of downloads and cease-and-desist orders. The difference is that nearly everyone used the download services despite legal and ethical questions. Early research suggests that few people are watching downloaded video. Nielsen Media Research found that less than 1 percent of content played on iTunes or iPods was video.

Other industry analysts say downloading movies is too nerdy for mainstream America.

It's tempting to side with the contrarians, to say that despite the millions spent on marketing it, downloadable video is a nonstarter.

As a frequent user of several of the movie-download sites, I think it's just a matter of time before they thrive. If I feel like watching a movie, I browse, I click, I watch.

As hardware to link TVs to the PC or directly to the Internet comes down in price, everyone will get their movies this way. Well, maybe after Internet connection speeds pick up enough to handle high-definition movies, and as movie selections continue to improve. But it's nearly prime-time ready.

As for mobile video, that seems inevitable, too. There's a whole generation growing up that was weaned on the little screen. They can't remember not owning a Nintendo Game Boy, a cell phone with a color screen, an iPod and a PlayStation Portable.

There was a time when the experts said Americans would never embrace mobile phone text messages the way Europeans and Asians had. The little-screen generation proved them wrong.

I'm sticking with the smart money. Video downloaded to the little screen or the big home theater is going to be huge. I don't want to be the guy who couldn't see the writing on the wall and ended up punch-drunk and steamrolled by a 500-pound gorilla.

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