Chapter XVI

Zync with Me:  
Synchronized Sharing of Video  
through Instant Messaging

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ABSTRACT

This chapter details a real world case study of a synchronized video-sharing tool, Zync. Zync was integrated into a popular instant messenger program that enables a virtual co-present “watch together” and “on-the-couch” viewing experience. Users can watch videos together in sync with each other, while they chat via text messages. Using logged data from 2,814 users, three types of people who share videos via IM are identified, as well as the different kinds of videos commonly shared and how users shared these videos with their IM friends. The authors follow up on these trends with user studies and interviews, which further explains how and why people are motivated to share videos. Based on their findings, the authors identify and define future design areas for synchronized sharing of video: to help keep people connected through media.

INTRODUCTION

We go to the movies with friends and we invite others to our homes to watch special events on TV. When we watch videos together, we often glance at a friend to see if they laughed at a joke. Afterward, we converse about the movie over coffee, ice cream, or a drink. Watching television and movies with friends is a regular social activity.

Web video—particularly its principle representative, YouTube—does not support synchronous social conversation. Without co-presence,
videos are watched alone. Our social interactions with videos are limited to asynchronous comment threads, emails, or instant messages (IM). When we do invite friends to watch a video with us, sharing and conversation often takes place by crowding around a monitor to watch a funny clip or huddling around a small screen on a video iPod.

In the presence of friends, having a conversation while watching a video can be arduous. Our attention is split between watching a video and talking to our friends. While some work has begun to investigate inter-personal connectivity and distraction created by watching together (Weisz, J. D, Kiesler, S, Zhang, Ren, Kraut, & Konstan, 2007), we know of no study which describes design principles of a synchronous video sharing system or people’s motivation to use it.

This chapter investigates the design, deployment, and study of Zync, a tool to provide synchronized video sharing for online videos through Instant Messaging. Unlike other sites (such as clipsync.com’s short pilot run in 2007) that offer their own infrastructure on the web, Zync is built inside of Yahoo! Messenger, an instant messaging client, using a publicly available API. Using an existing IM application provides access to an implicit social network (a friends/contact list) as well as lowering the barrier of entry to usage. Additionally being inside Yahoo! Messenger also allows Zync to be a tool for enhancing relationships and social capital amongst friends (Powazek, 2002). Merging a synchronized video-sharing tool with an IM client creates a single sharing experience and merges the media object with the conversation around it.

In addition to enabling a new sharing experience, Zync is built as a research platform to identify several unanswered questions for integrated chat and video sharing applications. Of particular interest is people’s interaction with Zync while sharing (when people chat, how they interact with the video player while sharing, etc.) and their motivations for sharing via Zync as opposed to conventional means. While research studies have shown people may enjoy media more and feel more connected when watching online together (Weisz, et. Al, 2007, Harboe, Mecalf, Bentley, Tullio, Massey, Romano, 2008), further questions still remain about the overall experience of synchronized sharing. How do people express a moment of interest in a video? Does conversation ensue over the course of a running video or do people chat when a video is paused. These questions must be answered through the study of real world tools, such as Zync, as the pragmatics and design of such systems have a direct outcome in people, their behaviors, and their motivation. With a greater understanding of the design interaction and people’s sharing motivations, we can inform future iterations of video sharing systems, understand how people remain socially connected and how personal relationships are maintained through media sharing.

BACKGROUND

The growth of online video has lead people to share videos. In some cases, the video is sent via a link (like an email or an instant message). Online chatting along with a live stream or broadcast has also recently become popular. In a study, Weisz, Kiesler, Zhang, Ren, Kraut, and Konstan (2007) showed people feel closer to each other and will enjoy the media more when they can chat with others at the same time, even though they found the chat distracting.

Another way of sharing and chatting about videos is waiting until a friend drops by their home and showing them the video in person. Many people leave video clips on their cell phone to share with people they might run into (Kirk, Sellen, Harper, Wood, 2007). Despite the distractions inherent to listening to two concurrent audio streams at once (Welford, 1967), face-to-face sharing provides a rich social engagement, one where people discuss while the video is playing.