

Position on Social TV

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ABSTRACT

In this position statement, I explore the following topics

- What are some of the challenges in developing and implementing social TV? How can they be addressed?
- How can social TV concepts move from the prototype stage to actual products in viewers' homes?

1. BACKGROUND

I have been involved with interactive TV development since the early days of exploration 12 years ago and built a number of the early interactive TV concept prototypes. I hold 6 patents related to interactive TV and remote controls. Since then I have done a wide range of work in the consulting and toy industries. I recently returned to Microsoft to work on exploring the next generation of TV applications for the Media Center group.

2. State of Social Networking today

Social networking has grown rapidly on the PC platform over the last several years. Recently it is spreading out to hand held mobile devices such as the iPhone and Windows Mobile devices through dedicated applications. There is a degree of social networking that exists on the TV though game consoles such as the Xbox 360 but these are closed systems and mostly limited to specific game experiences.

3. CHALLENGES

Challenges for developing a compelling Social TV experience center around three areas: the interaction models, TV usage and expectations from TV console on-line gaming already in place today.

3.1 Interaction Models

Social networking as it exists on the PC today is fairly text and image intensive, qualities that don't easily translate to well to the 10' interface scenario of the TV experience. A different type of experience and set of expectations will need to be developed to enable creation of effective social networking applications.

3.2 TV Usage

The other challenge is how the TV is used versus the PC. The TV is often a social/group hub within the home. The PC is more

personal (Personal Computer) and if it is shared it's only by one user at a time. A TV can have a single user or multiple users at one time. Watching TV is still primarily a passive consumption experience. People who are active social network participants tend to use their PC for this type of interaction.

3.3 On-Line Gaming

On-line gaming as with Xbox Live is very much a social experience and groups of friends regularly meet for game nights at specific times to interact. The primary interaction is via voice communication during game play. In some cases it can also just act as chat channel. On-line gaming does lack the asynchronous social nature of the PC based experiences such as Facebook which constrains the interaction to specific times and limits the scope.

4. OPPORTUNITIES

There are a number of opportunities for social networking on the TV if the challenges outlined above can be addressed. To be effective the social experience would need to be woven into the TV watching experience or linked with other activities that people do on the TV such as gaming. Typing long blog entries with the remote on a TV is probably not going to happen.

Social activities around TV shows, games or events will likely be the most effective opportunities initially. Sharing favorite shows or viewing programs together could be good initial explorations.

5. PROTOYPING

The key to exploring new application opportunities is developing and deploying prototypes and testing them with real users in their living rooms. Prototypes could be developed using the Media Center SDK or the XNA developer's kit for the XBOX. Staging servers could be set up to run limited tests and isolate the tests from impact on production servers. Links to existing social networks could be filtered through the staging server.

Small deployments should be done initially to gauge the effectiveness of the interface and work out operational bugs. Once the system is up and running it could be deployed as a Xbox Live application or a Media Center extension application to test in the home. The challenge is building enough usage critical mass to fully engage the social nature of the product. People need to have enough "friends" on-line to make it useful. A bridge to existing social networks such as Facebook could help accelerate the adoption of the system.