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Web Research for Social Television

The Idea

Our current plan for our project is to create a system that will allow people to synchronously watch videos on streaming services such as Netflix, Hulu, Xfinity, and YouTube from anywhere with an internet connection. This system would ideally have measures to keep everybody at the same place in their video, and have options for both voice and text chat to allow the group to socialize while watching.

Current Solutions

Screen sharing

There are currently several methods of accomplishing the basic idea of this system, but all of the ones found share some common flaws. There are programs such as Rabb.it that designate a member of the group as the host of the party and then share that person's screen and audio with the rest of the group. The problem with this is that for it to work well, the host of the party must have an incredible internet connection in order to have a good enough download speed to watch the video while also uploading it at a decent quality to everyone else in the group. These programs are also not typically designed specifically to share this streamed content, and so it is often necessary to manually edit settings either in the program or on your computer to make it work for this purpose, which can be both bothersome and run the risk of sabotaging future usage of the program. This method also could be considered ethically unsound, as it allows people who do not pay for these services to have access to them in ways that may break their Terms of Service.

InstaSync

InstaSync is an example of a system similar to the one we envision. It allows registered users to create either public or private viewing rooms, and watch a playlist of videos together. The drawback to the InstaSync service is that it currently only supports specific content providers, those being YouTube, Vimeo, DailyMotion, and Twitch.

Manual Synchronized Viewing

Another method common among people is to have the group members individually find their way to the video on their own then have a countdown over voice chat so everyone begins at the same time. While this is easily the least involving method as far as starting the process goes, it can raise all sorts of problems during the viewing process. If one person in the party suffers any form of interruption, whether it is a buffering hiccup or someone at the doorbell, it can be impossible to re-synchronize everybody due to them all being at slightly different places in the video. While having such a small difference may seem trivial, it is incredibly immersion-breaking to have someone react to a situation before other people, even if it is a split-second difference. Especially with a medium where

even the more serious works have been becoming increasingly comedic, it is important that everybody be experiencing the same thing at the same time.

Past Solutions

Netflix Party Mode

Until late 2011, the Netflix app on the Xbox 360 had a Party Mode, which would allow you to watch videos on Netflix together with people on your friend list while using voice chat. This was a very powerful tool which kept users synced while watching their video, but had the obvious drawback of being limited not just to Netflix, but Xbox 360 users as well. It also only offered the ability to communicate via voice chat, which some groups of people may find obtrusive since it can make it difficult to pay attention to the audio of what they are watching.

Bibliography

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