

On the Next Killer App

By Ron A. Zajac

Why video telephony failed in a market dominated by visual content -- and what can be learned from the experience.

In the corporate world of high-tech software production, most people spend much of their time engaged in "legacy work"; activities involving incremental improvements and enhancements to existing products. This could be robustness work, whose impact is perhaps less tangible and hence not very exciting and certainly not "cutting edge." This work obtains additional increments of money from customers who have already bought the legacy product.

One can imagine that, during a thoughtful moment at work, or at home, or in some bar over a beer, certain of these "information society" workers pause a moment to contemplate the future. Often, this is an attempt to predict the shape, size and odor of something that will be the "next Killer App." The next Killer App will come; it's just a matter of time. But what will it be? Underlying the thought is the sure knowledge that, by midwifing the next Killer App into existence, this technology worker would attain to a prestige they feel is not due to your average infoschlep. The fantasy that one might be the conduit for the next Killer App can be intoxicating.

I hope to introduce in this paper a new tack in the fantasy space of this epic quest. My hope is that it sheds light on an important human element in the social reality of popular technology acceptance.

The Visual Element

Consider the classic failure of what, to most casual observers, should have been a shoo-in as a Killer App: Video telephony. Why the jarring clash between all the immensely popular fictional representations of video telephony—countless sci-fi television programs and movies, futuristic advertisements, and Dick Tracy—and the hard, cold reality that attempts to introduce such technologies into the market, even recently at low cost, have failed? Why is it people don't want distance real-time video; or, at any rate, why don't they consider the costs and hassles worth the trouble? The role of the visual in human learning and interaction is one of the great wonders of life and existence. The visual is compelling. It's not just a cliché, and Missouri is not the only "Show Me" state. Consider all the successful visual inventions; television, movies, and that ultimate recent Killer App, the Web, whose voracious appetite for high-bandwidth visual content precedes and drives forward the IP infrastructure's capacity to stomach it all. Why the glitch with video telephony?

Nausea

Strange as it may seem, I may have found part of the answer in Jean-Paul Sartre's testy little tome, *La Nausée*. One of his devices is that he structures the book around an episode or series of episodes that drive to some engaging philosophical conclusion. One

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of these conclusions is summed up in a sentence neatly ensconced between leading scenarios and further ruminations on the theme:

But you've got to choose; to live or to tell stories [...; *vivre ou raconter*].

I should mention that in the development following this rather bold pronouncement he makes it clear he's not calling for the end of narrative in deference to living; he's just saying it's important not to confuse the two. Obviously, if he were seriously promoting the idea that narrative was antithetical to life, the writing of *Nausea* would be perhaps the consummate act of hypocrisy!

Anyway, something clicked in my mind, and I saw the connection. People embrace visual technologies when they're not real-time, when they enable people's natural storytelling, narrative-weaving capacities.

Two cases

To illustrate, I'll *raconte* a bit.

At my youngest daughter's 6th birthday party, a neighborhood friend agreed to shoot some video so we could have a record of the historic event. I like Libby, but I discovered an amazing, and in some ways disturbing, thing about her when I watched her video. I learned that one should never take for granted the fact that, even in the hands of a nudnik home user, video recording ultimately engages the user's natural narrative faculties; and that this is the essence of its charm. This becomes plain when viewing the birthday video. It's apparent that Libby, bless her heart, has no awareness of the narrative potentialities in the camera. She clamped that sucker to her eye, punched the "record" button, and treated the viewer to the non-stop cannonballing freight train of life, as lived by Libby. Like I said, I like Libby. She's actually one of the nicest people I know. And she just did us a favor. She shows that the key to the popular success of home video recording is that it best serves the narrative interests of the customer (*raconter*); *not* the interests of vérité-with-a-vengeance (*vivre*).

"...Earth to Infoschlep...."

I believe the answer to this conundrum is found when you redirect your attention away from the visual factor, and toward the narrative factor. Telephony is *vivre*. People pay for visual media when their inherent capacity to *raconter* is bolstered thereby. *Vivre* means I'll be at the laundromat 'til maybe about 4 p.m. and I'll pick up the tortellini on the way home. *Raconter* means I think the boss likes tortellini, but that doesn't mean it'll tip the scales in favor of my professional viability at dinner-with-the-boss tonight.

What does this mean to us as we take another slug off our beers and take another stab at dreaming up the next Killer App? It could mean we have to find a way to fashion a real-time interpersonal video technology that in some new way engages people's natural narrative abilities; their ability to fashion a narrative that gives meaning to their lives. It could mean that further opportunities to incorporate high-bandwidth visual media need to

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continue to be focused on the finished *objets d'art* associated with TV and film production or visually intensive Web pages. Perhaps exploration into some other as-yet-unknown media could be productive. Or it could point to a mass psychological change in which people come to find the video transmission of their everyday communications as deeply meaningful as video communication of emotionally charged narratives.

The idea that people don't want to bother seeing the person they're talking to just because it doesn't help them fulfill their need for narrative—potentially revisionist, reassuring narrative—is a little damning. Maybe that's the real gauntlet thrown down by this little analysis. Maybe Sartre's right. Perhaps the next Killer App is inside each of us and is not for sale. Perhaps there's *No Exit*.

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