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Breaking into film

Movie piracy on the Internet may be a small problem at the moment but many believe it won't be long before it becomes a widespread threat, says David Brake

SOMEWHERE in a dark corner of the Internet is a movie chat room with more than 100 people milling around day and night. But they aren't there to discuss the merits of popular films such as The Matrix, Entrapment and, of course, Phantom Menace. They are there to download them.

Episode 1
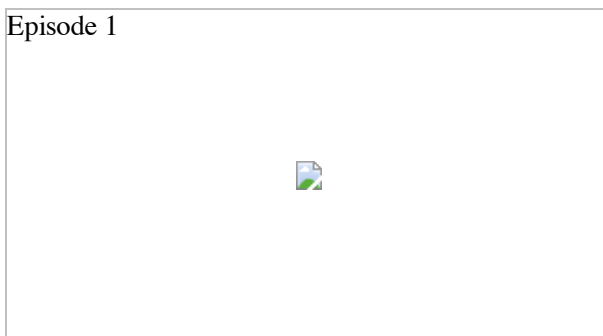
It can take hours watching for an opportunity before a would-be pirate can grab an open "slot" for downloading. And when the time comes finally to start pulling the files off the Internet, there is a second obstacle - the bootleg movie files on offer are over a gigabyte in size. Only a lucky few with cable modems or with high-speed Internet access through universities or large companies can transfer files of this size. According to Mikhail Reider, the Motion Picture Association's chief Net investigator, the resulting footage is hardly worth the bother.

"The Internet version was shot using a camcorder in a cinema and compressed in a clumsy fashion." It also appears, jerkily, in a small window on your monitor rather than on the big screen.

None the less, there are a few hundred people she calls "propeller-heads" who are doing this "just because they can" and "to show off their technical savvy".

But that isn't to say the MPA is taking this lightly.

University students have been caught in both Britain and America distributing movie files using campus networks, and were expelled, according to Reider. Other pirates in America who were using cable modems had their accounts with their cable providers cancelled when they were caught - in effect cutting them off from high speed Internet access in their areas.

Movie piracy on the Internet may be a small problem at the moment because of the technological limitations, but the motion picture industry has seen what happened to the music industry when MP3s made music piracy much easier. It knows that as technology advances it is only a matter of time - "five to 10 years", Reider believes - before Internet movie piracy becomes a widespread threat. By that time, the MPA hopes to have technical safeguards in place.

But while full-length films may still be too big for most to pirate, a 40-minute season finale of Buffy the Vampire Slayer which was postponed by the network in America has been widely copied across the Internet by impatient fans.

In the episode, called Graduation 2, the mayor of Buffy's town turns into a huge serpent and starts eating the students at the graduation ceremony until Buffy and other students arm themselves and fight back. It was delayed by Warner Brothers until July or later, "out of sympathy and compassion" because the company feared parallels would be drawn with the school massacre at Littleton High in Denver.

It was broadcast in Canada, however, where Warner Brothers does not control distribution. Within hours copies of the tape were on sale on the Ebay auction site, and the whole episode is downloadable from several websites. Depending on the quality you want it varies in size between 30Mb and 90Mb, which modem owners could feasibly download, if they have a lot of free time. The resulting episode is nowhere near TV quality.

Fans downloading and distributing the video are unrepentant. One commented: "We are the people. We have the Internet. We have the power. Any questions?" The show's creator, Joss Whedon, while initially supporting the company's view, later told USA Today that fans should "bootleg the puppy", and American media critic Jon Katz accused the network of stupidity and cowardice. But Warner Brothers says it will act "aggressively" to stop the pirates.

The music industry is taking the same stance with pirated pop on the Internet and it's not clear that the policy is working. Some think movie makers should see the Internet as a valuable promotion tool, not as a piracy threat. Rodger Raderman, chief executive and founder of independent film showcase ifilm.net thinks that is the way forward.

In May, his company used its website to show Dead Broke which he believes is the first new full-length feature film to be broadcast commercially on the Internet. It was shown free of charge, but his company is busily trying to find ways to allow film-makers to show their films and make money on the Internet.

"The genie is out of the bottle - eventually anybody will be able to publish anything anywhere," he said. "The larger question is whether the traditional distribution model is the way forward. In order to be seen, film makers have had to partner with a very small number of powerful distributors. We can put film directly in front of the consumers."

IFilm is experimenting with pay per view - its next feature film, Chalk, by Sundance prizewinning director Rob Nilsson will be shown free at low resolution but Internet users with very high speed access - 1.5mbit/s - will be able to watch a better quality version by paying about £2. It is also looking at advertising, and it plans to build up interest in another forthcoming film by inviting Internet users to eavesdrop on the whole production.

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