

Digital television: quality matches content

I often find myself trying to anticipate what the world would be like if entirely shaped by the indifferent grasp of quality exhibited by too many software development organisations. This week gave me another taste of what may be round the corner. The Radio Times went walkabout but generally I watch so little television that I don't especially care what terrible fate awaits the winner of "I'm a Celebrity, Get Me More Publicity", (although I am always happy to contribute ideas for terrible fates, ladies and gentlemen of the visual media). This time however, there was actually a program I wanted to see and I was driven to use the Freeview teletext facility.

I used to use the original analogue teletext and as is now occasionally being realised in the race to entirely digital distractions, analogue transmissions degrade more gracefully than digital ones in the presence of noise. With digital teletext, I prepared myself for the worst. I was not disappointed. Up until this week, I had got used to the snail-like pace at which it operates but it kind of worked. This week, however, they have upgraded it with rivettingly cool new features, bless 'em, and this is what it does now.

First of all, press 9 and wait for some time. Whistling helps. Eventually it invites me to press 'text' although goodness knows why it can't figure that out for itself. Next, some giant of the advertising world has decided that I want to watch cat-food ads over most of the screen whilst trying to find something which will not induce a narcoleptic state. The eponymous "please wait" message adorns the top of the advert to make sure I cannot escape its charms. Eventually it shows me a list of channels crammed into the right hand side of the screen. I choose one while the cat food ad drones on and the "please wait" message appears again. All buttons are now ignored for a period of 30 seconds at which point, wallop, the screen goes blank and my dearly beloved set-top box, resets itself and turns itself off. Its entirely repeatable and you have to start again from scratch. I expect that I'm supposed to download an update, (i.e. attempt to correct some of the horrendous bugs in it), but the last time I did this, it corrupted itself so comprehensively, I had to take it back and replace it.

Now, either 1) the engineering geniuses responsible for my set-top box and the new and coruscatingly useless digital teletext can sense my peculiar sensitivity to cat food adverts and turn it off before I succumb and march off to the cat food section of the local supermarket like a "Shaun of the Dead" extra or, 2) the aforementioned engineering geniuses have as much idea of engineering systems as I have of Etruscan poetry. My money is on the latter.

The reasons systems still get shipped in this state include the now familiar poor planning, deadline and panic driven development, lousy testing and indifferently trained engineers and managers. Systems like this simply taint everything associated with them so advertisers beware. Will it get better? Why should it? I promise I will try and be a little more upbeat next month, now where's that Radio Times ...

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