

This article takes a slightly 'tongue in cheek' look at the proliferation of pornography on the wireless Internet by examining what's out there now and talking to industry experts to see how they predict the shape of things to come. Article runs to 2417.

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Finding the Wireless Erogenous Zone - Pornography's Bid to go Mobile

"My mother used to say, 'Delia, if S-E-X ever rears its ugly head, close your eyes before you see the rest of it.'"

When the English play write Alan Ayckbourn penned those words for one of his characters back in the 70's, he would have had little idea how frequently and easily S-E-X rears its 'ugly head' these days, and nowhere more so than on the Internet. A huge segment of surfers around the world who are not as strong willed as Delia are more than willing to pay good money to 'see the rest of it', making pornography the biggest nice little earner on the world wired web.

Whilst other industries have struggled to squeeze revenue out of e-commerce, cyber sex has proved hugely profitable. Americans alone have spent more than US\$2billion accessing adult movies and pictures and worldwide it's estimated that up to US\$10billion has been spent by people doing just what Delia's mom warned against. In the UK more than a quarter of the Internet population boldly go where prudence has never gone before whilst our close European neighbours indulged themselves in even greater numbers. Like it or not, satisfying our primitive urge to see others indulging their urges is big business and booming all over the planet. From California to Kyoto, surfers are logging on to X rated sites in their millions.

This carnal cash cow has not gone unnoticed by the revenue-hungry wireless carriers eager to increase usage minutes, sell add-on services or otherwise

make more money out of a severely subscriber saturated market. The potential to make mega-bucks selling adult content over wireless networks is huge but whether the wireless Net becomes as much of a flesh fest as its wired cousin depends on matters technical, moral and legal.

So how big is yours? Is it 15 inches or a 19 inch monster? Mine's 17 inches and that's plenty big enough for me. Yes, screen size matters. Surfing the Internet is a colourful, multi-media rich experience just like television and as such lends itself perfectly to what porn does best - pictures. Naughty nakedness in full Technicolor is porn's raison d'etre and like it or not, the all round sensual experience you enjoy on your home pc with streaming images, high quality video, secure encryption and 3D surround sound is largely due to pioneering pornographers who pushed the development envelope to better display their wanton wares. Is it likely that the technological development of the wireless web will similarly be thrust forward by the porn peddlers?

For the moment it seems unlikely due to the insular nature of wireless technology evolution. "With the Internet you have a variety of plug-ins and you can easily download new software. The mobile Internet is still a very closed environment as far as upgrading your browser and adding new software" says Alan Reiter, President of Wireless Internet and Mobile Consulting. For the moment, Peter Pervert can't just use his PhD in computer science to load up a new and improved mobile media player and even if he did he'd face another barrier according to Edward Bronson, CEO of wireless multimedia vendor Solid Streaming. "The people who control the access to the wireless space are the wireless providers. They're keeping a walled environment, only allowing customers access to limited content. Until you have devices and browsers on the phones that allow access out of that walled environment, you're not going to have adult entertainment as a driver."

Now reach into your trousers and pull it out. Not very impressive is it? Even if an all singing, all dancing application did exist that allowed you to enjoy the full sensory experience, with screens still small and bandwidth limited, this chiefly visual industry cannot easily offer its services. But where there's a Willy there's a way and current technical limitations have not stopped many erotic entrepreneurs from adapting their naughty offerings to the current limited environment. Of the 15,000 listings found on Cellmania, the publisher of a worldwide mobile Internet service directory, almost 190 sites offer adult content of one form or another. "They are quite creative" says Jackie Peterson of Cellmania, "While there are a few that do pictures, there's also quite a bit of erotica and stories about experiences".

Nearly 40 adult WAP sites offering text based titillation can be accessed by any frisky European PDA or mobile owner and include such delights as SinPalm.com, a purveyor of salacious stories. "A study we did showed that 70 percent of our users like the erotic stories best," says Kathryn Hudson, founder of SinPalm. The service gained 23,000 subscribers a mere six months after its conception. Hudson says that 30 percent of the site's subscribers own Pocket PCs.

XXXWAP.net is doing very nicely too by offering customers a smorgasbord of erotic stories, adult jokes, sex advice and, for those who have run out of ideas, a sexual position of the week. Erotigo.com in New York, whose catchy corporate legend is "Sex in the Palm of your hand.", had gone for the 'resource' approach by publishing a free wireless directory listing strip clubs, video stores and lewd lingerie outlets.

Text based epicurism is proving equally lucrative for Tony O'Neil, a 20 year old American student who developed a subscription based sex story service for the Palm. Of his 9000 or so customers, 400 are happy to pay US\$5.95 a month for access to four pieces of pornographic prose a day but, he says,

handheld users definitely have a desire for more. "As soon as we started people were saying they wanted pictures. People want more than just text but the technology just isn't there yet."

'Yet' being the operative word. With the arrival of 2.5G and 3G networks, higher data rates and larger colour screens that more readily lend themselves to adult content; it seems only a matter of time before the mobile carriers start to rake in the carnal cash and MMS may well be the initial market penetration they've been looking for.

According to The British consultancy Mobile Streams Ltd., who surveyed European carriers about the applications they believe will drive multimedia messaging services, the top two were person-to-person messaging and messaging still photographs but carriers say the No. 3 application that end-users will favour is adult entertainment. It ranked ahead of games, video clips and screensavers/wallpaper. Not surprisingly carriers want to slap a premium price on such risqué content because they know it will be very popular, especially with a certain sex-mad segment of society already hooked on SMS and likely to upgrade to something more exciting in their millions once they've got enough pocket money - teenagers. According to Internet monitoring company Net Value, one-fifth of British children under the age of 17 who have access to the Internet are looking at pornography, therefore any carrier even contemplating selling sex has both a fiscal and moral obligation to firstly develop effective filtering software that will make sure children below legal age do not pick up daddy's mobile and 'grow up' way before their time.

Funding for such essential application development should not be a problem when one discovers that some of the biggest and richest names in porn such as Penthouse and Playboy magazines are already hatching plans to bring their famous or infamous centrefolds into the wireless boudoir.

"The potential upside for wireless is definitely there," said David Bienenstock, editor of Penthouse.com. "It is definitely a growth market in so far as the number of people who have these devices and the part these devices play in these lives is definitely going to increase."

Playboy is keen to get into bed with 'big boys' of the wireless world such as Vodafone Group, Virgin Mobile, Hutchison 3G and Germany's third largest carrier E-Plus, all of whom are sizing up the potential of getting surfers going on the go.

E-Plus recently announced a 15-month deal with Playboy to provide adult content to subscribers of the carrier's new I-mode service. Subscribers will pay between US\$1.40 and US\$2.80 per month to download photos from Playboy's Web site, as well as other content such as cartoons and entertainment news.

The director of Virgin Mobile's adult content team, Nick White, says his company wants to be known as 'the sexiest service.' He says the operator is planning more content and services that will appeal to adult single, straight, gay and married customers 'who have an open mind to sex and relationships.'

Hutchison views the porn potential with such seriousness that it has gone as far as hiring a 'Director of Adult Entertainment' to explore its possibilities. The executive is charged with developing ways of offering 'soft-core pornography' over 3G mobile phones which will support multimedia. A source at Hutchinson said they are unlikely to produce or edit porn themselves but may form partnerships with porn producers and take a cut of revenue.

Perhaps Playboy's biggest coo was to sign a deal with Finland's Wireless Entertainment Services to offer its branded content over WES networks that already span a good proportion of the globe. The carriers to which WES

already supplies content include Telia and Radiolinja in Scandinavia, TDC Switzerland, KPN and Ben of the Netherlands, Proximus of Belgium, Telenor of Norway, Eurotel of the Czech Republic, StarHub of Singapore and Spain's Telefonica, although it's not certain which carriers would carry the Playboy content.

But while all the big names may be desperate to jump on the bawdy bandwagon, the al fresco nature of the mobile might put the breaks on the seemingly inexorable advance of the erotic express.

Daniel Miller, an analyst with market research firm Kelsey Group, questioned whether people would want to access porn all the time, which would be possible on a mobile phone.

"It crosses lines between public and private," he said. "You probably wouldn't want someone next to you in the subway car reading Playboy. There are boundaries that are crossed having mobile versions of pornography."

He's right. Although porn is all pervasive, it is essentially an intimate experience best suited to the privacy of the users own home, away from the eyes of the potentially offended. There are not many who would blatantly read the printed Playboy in public so what makes publishers think mobile owners would be so bold with an electronic version?

Playboy's Bienenstock feels there are pros and cons to bringing the magazine to the handheld space. "One barrier is that you are not viewing this material in the way it is meant to be viewed. It is not going to be as beautiful as the magazine in your hand," he noted. "At the same time, you can take these things with you and interact with them in different places, in ways that a computer or a magazine does not really make possible." Whether you 'interact' with Playboy at home or on the bus, could the current anti-obscenity

laws and restrictions on what can and cannot be viewed or read on-line spoil their fun and halt mobile hedonism in its tracks?

The one lesson the wired Internet seems to have taught us is you cannot legislate against basic human nature. Sociologists say that sex and the acquisition of money are two of man's basic drives which together form a mix so potent that no matter how strong the laws and clever the filtering software, someone, somewhere will probably find a way to circumvent official dictate. It's already happening in Japan. The country has a strict anti-porn policy and regularly arrests and charges citizens who create adult sites that could be downloaded through its wireless networks but, as officials at I-mode admit, there is no way the firm can verify the content of the several hundred unofficial sites also accessible through NTDocoMo's service. Will law enforcement agencies with finite manpower and resources be willing or able to track, trace and charge thousands of potential 'pirate' porn site owners?

In Saudi Arabia they didn't have to. The authorities their beat smut into submission by simply turning off the capability for its mobile network to transmit pictures, pornographic or otherwise. That the Saudis had to take such drastic action shows that even in countries where culture or creed forbids such carnal capers, those animal urges still manage to find an audience. Commonly held social mores, religious beliefs or strict statutes may pressure carriers into self-censorship but stopping home-based boffins with carnal lusts and the technical knowledge to indulge them is another matter. Governments who contemplate threatening networks with disconnection or censorship because of their user's uncontrollable inventiveness could find themselves entering a legal and economic minefield.

So what of the future? Industry insiders believe that the wireless web will more or less follow its fixed cousin down the porno path. Frederick Lane, who has been following the growth of cyber porn since the dawn of the Internet

and is author of the book *Obscene Profits: The Entrepreneurs of Pornography*, believes that "Once wireless companies overcome infrastructure barriers, you'll see the pornography industry really helping to develop the delivery mechanisms for handheld devices. This might eventually translate into some heavy investments in software encryption and video streaming from pornography producers".

Will Strauss, an analyst at telecommunications research firm Forward Concepts seems to concur, believing that the inevitable development of better micro browsers, colour screens and faster networks will give multi media entertainment companies, including pornographers, the incentive to develop wireless technology that will give end users an experience similar to what they get on the wired Net.

For all those carriers currently straining at the leather studded leash to get their networks involved this can only be encouraging news but for those who view the torrid tsunami looming on the horizon with dread and foreboding I can only suggest one thing, do what Delia did and close your eyes before you see the rest of it.

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