

A PRODUCT IS BORN (ON THE NET)

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About two years ago [1997] I walked into the small computer lab down the hall from my office. Some of my MOTI course students were there working on their projects. One of the computers equipped with a sound system was blasting music that the entire group seemed to enjoy. I asked if they were playing a CD, but Josh, sitting in front of that computer, told me that they were listening to “Em-Pee-Three” music. I had no idea what that meant until they explained to me that they downloaded their music from the Internet in a format called MP3 and played it on WinAmp. Little did I realize that I witnessed the birth of probably the first product developed, delivered, and promoted on the Internet.

Music, when taken in an abstract way, is pure information. This makes music highly suitable for Internet distribution and marketing.

Intellectual property concerns notwithstanding, MP3 format has created a unique niche because it offers rather intriguing attributes.

- First, it is a purely digital form of music that can exist in standard PC or Macintosh file formats. This attribute makes it possible to move music that has no physical form rather rapidly on communication networks like the Internet.
- Second, MP3 format compresses the music. Although there is some loss due to the compression, the sound is almost CD quality.
- Third, this music, that does not require any physical space, can be organized and played on any computer equipped with a sound system. The players like WinAmp, MusicMatch or RealJukebox are low-cost, no-cost software that can be downloaded from their respective Web sites.

- Finally, the MP3 music that is purchased on the Internet can be stored on a writeable CD. My crude tests indicate that every minute of recording takes up about 1MB disk space. Writeable CDs have approximately 650MB of space, which translate to an impressive ten hours, or so of music on a CD.

This compares very favorable to the sixty-to-ninety minute playing time of music CDs. I do not even want to think about the listening time of MP3 music recorded on a DVD. Who wants to listen to over seventy hours of music on a single DVD? There may be instances when quantity of music may be more important than the quality of it.

Last year, taking advantage of the MP3 wave, Diamond Multimedia introduced a portable player, Rio. This device, about the size of a pack of cigarettes, could store about forty-five minutes of music uploaded from a PC. The playback is not affected by jarring or other sudden movement since there are no moving parts, but the limitation of the physical product prevented it from becoming too popular. This year, Rio has a larger storage capacity and as of mid July 1999, there are ten portable MP3-players, five hobbyist devices in the market and seven more are in various stages of development. These products with physical presence in the real world would not have emerged had MP3 format not been first introduced on the Internet. The MP3 format has become so popular most of the major search engines offer a dedicated search category to hunt more MP3 music on the net. Many budding artists prefer to publish in MP3 format and only on the Internet. One of these groups even made the CNN news with their exclusive publishing in this format.

Piracy is the main obstacle in the way of distributing MP3. The Internet makes copying and distributing pirated music very easy and this understandably concerns the major record labels. The five major record labels that control 85% of the album sales in the US insist on copy protection built-in to the music as “watermarks.” The Secure Digital Music Initiative (SDMI), a group of computer and music companies, outlined the basics of the standards that will allow for the distribution of music on the Internet while protecting the rights of the artists and the publishers.

So far, MP3 has attracted attention as a music compression format. However, there will probably be equally important and perhaps even more suitable use for this new technology in audio books. Today, an abridged edition of a literary work barely fits to two audio cassettes. When the technology matures, we might be able to download “AudioLit,” if I may predict a name, with the same ease. The race is now on. These developments will likely result in more enjoyable products. Already, the premier content site mp3.com is giving away MP3 music on a CD. The ad at the site says “103 FREE full-length MP3 songs, including music from Alternative, Rock, Pop, Classical, Electronic, Hip Hop, Jazz, Blues, and more!” which will provide hours of uninterrupted music. Of course, this format music cannot be played on regular audio-CD players, YET! Will it be too long before we see “hybrid CD players” that can play both kinds of CDs, or a portable device that can be carried wherever one wants to take it with large storage?

It better be a long hike.

See the following sites for additional information:

<http://www.mp3.com/>

<http://www.diamondmm.com/>

<http://www.real.com/>

<http://www.winamp.com/>

<http://www.cnn.com/> (search for MP3 for related news)

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