

Webwatcher

Websites are just the beginning for the internet: coming soon is interactive programming.

Rob Buckley talks to the man behind Hat Trick's first "semi-interactive" foray on the web

Greg Dyke wants the BBC to make money. The Davies commission wants the BBC to make money. Even the BBC's employees want the BBC to make money. So how come it won't let others help it make money? That's one question Paul Zwillenberg, European md for internet company KPE Interactive, wants answered. "I find it hard to understand," he reflects, "how on one hand they want profits, but on the other hand won't do anything to support those profits."

Zwillenberg is in a unique position. His company has a deal with Hat Trick to produce interactive programming for the company - be it new internet formats, games, iTV or websites to complement existing shows - so he's already encountered first-hand the BBC approach to independents making websites of the shows

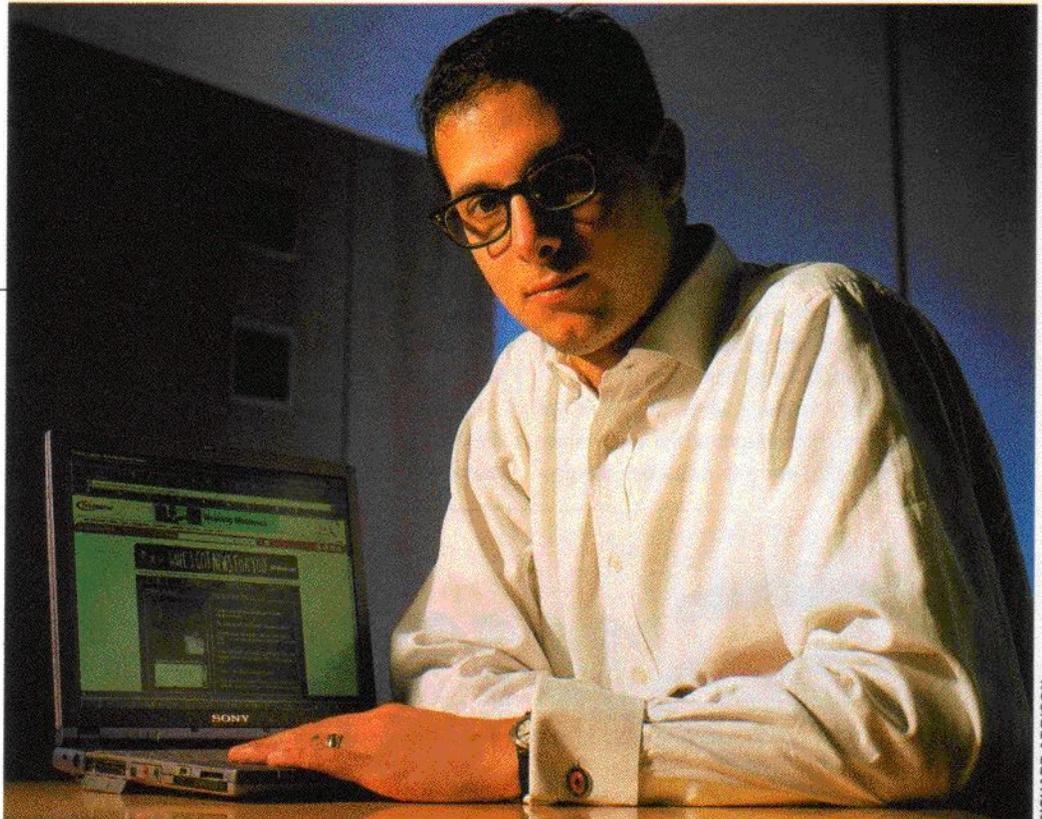
the corporation is airing. And it's not pretty (according to Jimmy Mulville and Peter Bazalgette).

Haveigotnewsforyou.com. It's long, yes. But it's also easy to remember. And if you're looking for a site about your favourite long-running, top-rated BBC2 news quiz, probably the first place you'd guess to go to. Because there's no way you'd hear about it from the BBC - the corporation is refusing to mention it. Nothing at the end of the programme, nothing on its own site, bbc.co.uk.

The BBC, in its defence, claims it has the rights to any *Have I Got News For You?* internet site so why should it promote something that has no right to... well, the rights. But with a contract arranged before the web was a glimmer in Tim Berners-Lee's eye, Hat Trick thinks that's debatable.

The Kansas-City-born Zwillenberg's advice to the BBC, which he reckons has the desire to create interactive programming but "not the budgets to do

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it," is to pull out of the areas and those "expensive initiatives" the private sector does well and focus on the areas it doesn't or doesn't find profitable - such as community programming - while supporting companies like his to help it make money.

In the meantime, Zwillenberg and KPE are keeping their heads down and working to be one of the front-runners of the broadband internet revolution, when television can be beamed down the phone lines or over the internet as easily as over the airwaves. "We're just in the early days of the media entertainment services," he expounds. "In the same way as radio transformed newspapers and television extended radio, broadband will enable us to do whole new things we probably haven't even thought of yet."

When he says "we," he means the industry rather than himself or his company. Because, back in Los Angeles, he has a team of 40 working on fathoming

"creative and business models for immersive, threaded, and highly-targetted niche programming" - none of which he wants to discuss lest anyone get the same ideas as they have. But "if it becomes web-casting of existing programmes, then the industry will have failed to take this platform and do great things with it.

"I think there'll be a serious impact on the way 30- to 60-minute passive broadcasts will operate in future. You have to ask yourself why people would just sit and watch when they can get involved and immersed in it." With Zwillenberg predicting programming for mobile phones as well as "programming you can wear," KPE is obviously seeing a brave new world of ubiquitous television through its LA crystal ball.

For the moment though, the lack of broadband availability in the UK means KPE and Hat Trick are concentrating on the narrowband experience, ►

PEOPLE PAUL ZWILLENBERG

something he doesn't really rate very highly. "Without broadband, it's no comment really. We're focusing instead on making the site as accessible as possible to the greatest audience we can, by concentrating on relatively low-bandwidth applications. As the platform evolves, we'll develop more animations and more graphics."

As he points out, it's all a learning experience, different in its own way from the Daily Mail's web offering that he created before joining KPE. How to publicise a website for a TV programme when the broadcaster won't, for instance? The KPE way is to use "word of mouth, the press, the online press" and to establish a deal with number-one UK internet service provider, Freeserve, so the site will become part of its entertainment channel. But, once they're there, what keeps the attention-deficient web-surfer glued to your pages?

"We learned that if you just put up the schedule and some pretty pictures from the filming, it won't attract any users," he divulges. "If you allow loyal viewers to interact with the show and play the same games they watch on TV, they'll come back."

But Zwillenberg's hackles begin to rise at the concept of two-way interaction: when the viewer can feed back to the creators to influence the pro-

gramme itself. At first, he assumes interactivity in broadband internet programming to mean the ability to choose camera angles. "For sports, that would be quite important. That would probably ruin the whole thing for a drama. I don't think it's a really relevant question." Something, no doubt, that would surprise Arnold Schwarzenegger, whose new film, *The 6th Day*, is being shot from different characters' points of views for its DVD release.

Or is interactivity chatting to the stars? "They'll get a chance to speak to Angus and Paul. But, how could we let people chat with Paul every day? He's got to sleep. It's completely irrelevant." Perhaps it's being able to influence the outcome of the show. "The show's taped then aired on Friday. There's no way you could have that."

Nor does the dawning idea of a viewer democracy appeal. "Why would they want to change the rounds? They *do* like it. It's the most popular show on BBC2. What are you going to do? Take out 'the odd one out' round because a minority on the website doesn't like it but the majority of viewers does? I don't understand the relevance. No comment."

Despite being a net-centric (if not particularly viewer-friendly) company, KPE still understands the television business isn't run by machines - hence

an impending move to Soho. "We're a media entertainment company so it's crucial to us to be in the thick of things. It's still a people business." All the wonders of modern technology available to the firm have been set to one side because television is about "greeting, wining, dining and dealing."

But while Zwillenberg is embracing the old as well as the new, he offers warnings to those who won't go the other way. "The vast majority of production companies don't understand and haven't come to grips with the effects the broadband revolution will have. As we saw in America, it was people who got out there first that won the prizes.

"TV is essentially a creative business and different creative types have different ways of working. Some will continue to work independently, but you'll see a new class of production company that understands." He foresees a shift in the balance of power. "The great creative people are going to learn how interactivity works. Those who establish themselves will win the kudos."

KPE's contract with Hat Trick means it won't be working with anyone else in the near future. But if Zwillenberg is right, producers will have to ally themselves with companies like his to avoid being left behind in the broadband rush coming soon. ■