

Review: Oscars iPad app wonderful, but distracting

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Interactivity during the Academy Awards telecast once meant booing at the television every time there was a winner I hadn't picked for my Oscars pool. This year, I had my head glued to an iPad instead.

The Oscars' official companion app returned this year, after winning an Emmy in 2011 for outstanding creative achievement in interactive media. Produced by ABC, the network that televised Sunday's ceremony in the U.S., the free software gave me backstage access, a journey through history and a chance to challenge friends on predicting winners.

Before the show, I used the app to link my Oscars picks to Facebook so I could compete with my friends and track their progress throughout the evening. I viewed video clips on how people dress up for the ceremony and how celebrity chef Wolfgang Puck prepares a party appetizer. Movie critics, including The Associated Press' Christy Lemire, chimed in on major nominees.

There was video of Oscars host Billy Crystal's 1992 opening monologue and a few clips of backstage speeches by winners last year. I also saw nine "great moments" from past shows, including Jack Palance's spontaneous push-ups after winning best supporting actor in 1992.

During the show, I got a "backstage pass" to video not available on TV. Ads from Sprint occasionally interrupted the live streams.

The app was available in the U.S. for Apple's iPhone and iPod Touch, but you really needed the iPad's larger screen to make the best use of it.

Shamefully, there wasn't a version for the millions of Android phones and tablet computers out there, let alone BlackBerrys and other devices. It reminded me of how annoyed owners of Apple's Mac computers felt when companies made software only for Windows computers.

Those fortunate enough to own an iPad - or borrow one, as I had - got a more extensive, but less polished perspective than the one on TV: The app gave me access to 24 cameras during the ceremony, the walk down the red carpet before the show and the Governors Ball afterward.

Some of what I would have missed if I had relied on the TV telecast:

- A view of stars milling around and chatting during the commercial breaks. It was neat seeing them rush to their seats as the show was about to resume.

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- Winners in front of a "thank you" camera backstage, as they acknowledged family and friends they didn't have time to name during the few minutes they had on stage.
- Other backstage cameras with press appearances and interviews, plus a view of the TV production's control room.
- Stars grabbing drinks before the show on the "lobby bar" cam, along with three views of celebrities arriving, walking on the red carpet and entering the theater. Another camera got me interviews not available on television.
- Cameras trained on stars arriving at the Governors Ball and the stations where winners got their awards personalized with engraved nameplates.

I was able to watch six camera views at once or choose one at a time with alerts on what I was missing elsewhere. I had no control over where each camera pointed, however. The app also offered to have the show's producers choose a camera view for me, just like television, though the stream was different from the TV broadcast and was focused on the backstage happenings.

The experience came across as paradise for movie buffs. What I liked was the raw feel to the video, a sense that you were a spy at the ceremony, getting a perspective that wasn't tailored to the masses. At one point, I also saw workers move a couch backstage during a photo op with the first winner. Apparently winners looked better standing.

Other people may get bored with the three awards for short films, but I was genuinely interested in what the winners had to say, having had a chance to see all 15 nominees in a theater a few weeks ago. Meanwhile, I got bored with all the attention on "The Artist" and "Hugo." I'm sure they were both good movies, but all the focus on TV was on them as the pair won 10 awards combined. Out came the iPad.

One of the app's best features was its ability to show me how friends were doing with their own Oscars picks. I wished more of my friends had used it, so that I could have competed with a broader group. It wasn't as satisfying beating just three. I also wished the app had a database of past Oscars winners and bios on the nominees.

The app was video-centric, with Twitter feeds and the Oscars picks thrown in. And only selected Twitter posts were available. Had I not checked elsewhere, I would have missed one making fun of Zach Galifianakis and another from "Darth Vader" referring to the Oscars statues as tiny C-3POs.

I have a larger gripe regarding the app's lack of closed captioning. Beyond excluding those with hearing problems, the app was disturbing to family and friends who wanted to watch on TV. I wished I could have kept the iPad volume down and followed speeches through captions instead.

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More highlights from the telecast also should have been made available on demand. Twenty clips became available within an hour after the show ended, but not the opening comedy skit or the tribute to moviemakers who had died.

I was so glued to the iPad that I missed celebrity prankster Sacha Baron Cohen, posing as The Dictator, "accidentally" spilling what he said were ashes of the late North Korean dictator Kim Jong Il on red carpet host Ryan Seacrest. To see it, I needed the TV's digital video recorder.

Overall, though, I found the app pleasant to use. It was far better than the early days of the Internet, when a broadcaster would add a chat room to a website and call it "interactivity".

These types of extensive "second screen" offerings will become more popular and pervasive over time, especially for big events such as the Oscars, the Super Bowl and perhaps Election Night. People are going to have their phones or tablet computers with them anyway. By offering an app, broadcasters capture viewer attention that might otherwise have gone to texting or tweeting.

That said, it's not always a good thing. When watching with a group, it's best to sit back and relax and enjoy the company of those around you. I missed out on that human interaction by focusing on the app. I could have stayed home and done that.

My cousin's daughter asked at one point, "Why don't you just watch the Oscars?" - meaning the television. Smart for a 5-year-old.

I do encourage broadcasters to continue developing these companions, but I urge viewers to refrain from using them in the company of others. It's bad enough that we spend much of our free time with ears covered by headphones and our eyes glued to a gadget.

Some events are meant to be enjoyed with others, free of technological distractions.

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