

# THE WIRELESS CONFUSION; A CALL TO ARMS



Look at the development of any new technology and you will see three things:

1. The early developer, keen to play with any new toy.
2. The cynic who "prefers the system I use already."
3. The novice, who "never understood the last technological development, so how will I ever get my head around this one?"

Take the now ubiquitous streaming media, for example... "Wow, it lets me connect to live events all over the world? Can I have a go?" versus "It's not as good as TV" or "I can't even set my video recorder, I'll never be able to make my computer do this."

Wireless technologies face the same problems with even more confusions. 'Wireless' means 'Radio,' 'Laptops,' 'Mobile Phones,' '802.11b,' 'Bluetooth,' 'Infra-red,' 'PDAs' and many other things to many different people. Even if you examine the mobile phone definition alone, the differences across countries, regions, handsets, service providers, etc., make the whole concept of designing content for them inaccessible.

Or does it? I personally believe that the mobile phone data space (like the early days of the Internet) is essentially empty, an under-used and under-valued distribution outlet. If we don't take this opportunity to fill it with quality, suitable content as soon as possible, it will simply end up as another advertising outlet.

**...the differences across countries, regions, handsets, service providers, etc, make the whole concept of designing content for them inaccessible. Or does it?**

You may have guessed that I'm going to focus on the mobile phone arena, even though 'convergence' (the buzz word you will have heard around) really means 'film, TV, iTV, radio, internet and mobile phones.' The same language is used to underwrite all of these platforms, but I'll come back to that.

So, why should you care? Let's go back to the beginning, with some questions. Do you own a mobile phone? The answer (certainly within the UK) is inevitably 'Yes.' What do you do with it? Answers range from "Oh I just use it to speak to my daughter" through to "I use it to play games." Next question -- do you own a television? What about a home computer? Think about the different types of content you watch or play with on these devices; how would you feel about them all being available on your mobile phone? "Well, that's just stupid; the screen is black and white and too small, and the speakers are crap. Why would I want to watch television on such a small device?"

Good points, all of them, but now I'm obliged to clarify a few things:

**fee plumley**

The first is that you don't need to limit your ideas to the mobile phone you own today; this is the future of entertainment, and it incorporates devices that don't really exist in many countries yet. The point is that you can be working now to fill space for audiences tomorrow.

Secondly, I'm not suggesting that the content you will be watching on your handheld device will be the same content you sit back and watch at home -- it's the start of a new type of content, a new type of entertainment and a new type of interactivity.

Third, just because you don't use something now (because it's not available in your country, it's not targeted at you, you can't afford it, or you don't really understand the whole interactive thing), it doesn't need to exclude you from making this type of content yourself, even maybe make a living out of it.

Finally, yes, it's true: it is now possible (some would say, a requirement) for artists to make an income from their work.

Fortunately, even in the UK, the rise in Internet use -- and more importantly, Internet confidence -- has changed the way people think. Take blogging for example, which has become huge, mainly because of a general need for people to write about themselves while being nosy about the lives of others. This couldn't have happened unless the technology was relatively easy (most blog sites have a simple form-based navigation, making technical knowledge unnecessary) and cheap (there are so many ISP/hosting solutions that you can actively promote yourself several times over).

I keep coming back to parallels

between traditional and Wireless Internet, but with the mobile phone sector, there's one key distinction: traditional Internet is free; Wireless Internet (and other mobile content) is not. America's free Internet access provision secured its widespread use, but by the time we in the UK started to pay attention, our providers were charging us for the same access, and we were furious! However, just take a look at the mobile 'personalisation' industry, where one company buys the rights of distribution to popular culture or big name brands, and sells them on to smaller companies for a profit share. UK consumers spend over a quarter of a million pounds every week on making their mobile phone look and sound exactly the same as everyone

**It's no wonder people are confused. It's no wonder artists aren't making the most out of this dynamic new distribution potential. It's no wonder people's eyes glaze over when I get excited**

else's. There's an obvious difference -- we were already used to paying for our telephone calls, it makes sense that we don't mind paying to surf the Web on our mobiles. At least, it would make sense if there was any decent content to browse on the, well, let's face it -- restricted WAP technology.

WAP, there's an interesting subject. The WAP forum -- available now through the 'Open Mobile Alliance' to anyone who has the \$35,000 membership fee -- was founded in June 1997 by three mobile phone manufacturers, Ericsson, Motorola and Nokia, together with the US software company 'Phone.com' (formerly 'Unwired Planet' and now 'Openwave') who -- rather than buying

into existing, exciting technologies produced elsewhere in the world and lose the return on investment in unsold handsets -- decided that they would create a new, restricted language that their existing handsets could cope with. So instead of phones available in Japan and now parts of Europe, which uses Internet protocols and CHTML (compact HTML, essentially allowing you to view most well designed websites on your phone), we're stuck with a made-up protocol, which only allows you to view WML (wireless mark-up language) pages. So, what does WAP (Wireless Access Protocol) do differently? It uses mobile phone service provider gateways (each with their own data rate limitation) to control what access you have. It also likes to give you the

impression that you need to be affiliated to a service or handset provider to produce your own sites. WML is managed in sets of cards, with each holding about 150 words to a page, and wbmp (wireless bitmap) images. Oh, I should add that WAP2.0 now displays colour WML pages and colour gifs... on some handsets... through some gateways...

It's no wonder people are confused. It's no wonder artists aren't making the most out of this dynamic new distribution potential. It's no wonder people's eyes glaze over when I get excited about what could be. It's time that the handset manufacturers think less about the profits of today, and more about the technology of

tomorrow, and that they educate people into how to use and make content. And hell, while we're at it, why don't we go the whole hog and ask them why they don't actively encourage widespread creation of quality wireless content? If they insist on minimising output to 150 words, why don't they encourage the production of content that occupies and inspires their consumers in 150 words or less?

The Japanese market has offered a solution to exactly this problem. NTTDoCoMo, producers of i-mode (the technology I mentioned earlier which launched in 1996 and is available now in some parts of Europe) and FOMA (Freedom of Multimedia Access -- the first, and IMHO the best 3G technology to be released) recognised that audiences needed to be given a reason to stay online, so they gave them one; good content. How did they get this good content? Simple; they gave the content producers 80% profit share based on the market value of the work -- if your site is visited many times, you gain 80% of the profit NTTDoCoMo earned from users. The WAP system charges based on 'time online,' which makes it difficult to calculate what pages were popular, and therefore impossible to efficiently profit share. i-mode and FOMA are delivered on systems more like GPRS; in packets. If you download several pages by one artist and you don't download pages by another... the charging mechanism is clear.

So that brings us back to my starting point -- why should you care? What we at the-phone-book Limited do is try to empower people by promoting an awareness of the wireless content marketplace. Once they know it exists, we

show them how simple it is to get started. The fact is that wireless content is commercial, so we use this as a springboard to a potential income source for artists, or people who'd always thought of themselves as creative but have never been given the chance. Through a series of commissions, workshops and a general 'Call to Arms' we actively encourage people to take control of an under-used, and for the most part, uninspiring section of cyberspace.

Our commissions credit selected artists/writers/filmmakers/animators/musicians with remuneration fit for their skills. Our open submission and online workshops were designed to be minimal, offering simple navigation for the least technically competent, while keeping the geeks happy through a broader understanding of both context and potential -- our artwork is the structure of the commissions; the artists' artwork is the content they produce using our tools, and our participants benefit through the ability to use our workshops to teach other people how to do the same thing.

We don't charge you to read our stories, or to submit your own; we don't even charge you to browse our online workshops. We could have made a bunch of our own content and stuck it up on our servers. We could have asked students to give us their work for free -- it's showcasing, after all... (you'd be surprised how many traditional businesses think we're mad not to have done that). We believe that in order to get quality content, you have to pay professional rates. We can do this because we're arts-funded, but it doesn't stop there. What we want to do now is start to cross the gaping hole that divides arts and business. We know that wireless

technologies need a portfolio of quality content in order to attract much-needed consumers in today's unstable environment. We know that the future of TV is in interactivity, and yet most consumers don't know how to set their VCR, let alone 'press the red button.' We know that 'convergence' really means that all these technologies do (or will) use the same language, xhtml, "eXtended Markup Language," so the same content can be shown on your mobile, your TV and traditional Internet all at the same time. So why aren't you doing it?

We therefore invite you to join us in setting the record straight; in making new and innovative types of content for these new and innovative technologies. We also encourage you to use your mobile phone intelligently, to surf the wireless Web, to make your own ringtones and logos, and to support projects that develop creative careers. We're not trying to become millionaires, we just want what's right -- a true wage for a true service. We hope to never have to charge for our services, but we equally aim to survive independently, and with your support, the industry cannot help but engage with our collective development.

Fee Plumley is Production Manager of the-phone-book Limited, a Manchester-based company that educates people in being creative with new technology and ethically buys, sells, and circulates content for wireless devices.

fee@the-phone-book.ltd.uk  
www.the-phone-book.ltd.uk  
po box 134, manchester m21 9wz