

The little wheel goes round and round

Screen Great Entertainment With Online Summer Viewing

The good old summertime, that beloved season of vacations, travel, fun and adventure, is here again. Too bad all those things are so expensive. Not to mention all that effort involved planning, preparing, and packing for even the simplest trip to the pool.

Just venturing to the mall for a movie can become a complicated and costly expedition, having to cope with sun, heat, and traffic. But staying home can be so boring; the chattering TV full of endless summer reruns, mindless drivel, and idiotic infomercials.

Happily, there are cures for the summertime blues available anytime online. Surfers can explore the cosmos, learn new things, find new hobbies, fire up old passions, develop skills, connect with old friends and new acquaintances, buy and make all kinds of stuff.

Paying for viewing

Yet that's a lot of work for this season devoted to relaxation. Why not just chill out with munchies, cool beverages, and something entertaining to watch?

The bad news is that the Internet is *not* TV. It was never designed for **broadcast** and there are still numerous problems **streaming** programs to mass audiences at **high definition**. Many online videos rely on tiny or low-quality images or require annoying pauses while the connection races to catch up.

If you've got a good connection and are not averse to paying for programming, the online entertainment megastore **Amazon** (www.amazon.com) has just made a deal with Viacom to stream 250 series over their **Prime Instant Video** service – mostly from family-friendly networks like Nickelodeon.

Shows are offered by episode for a couple of bucks, or even cheaper when purchased as a season. Not to be outdone, movie rental giant **Netflix** (netflix.com) offers shows for less than \$8/month. Both offer free trials and have huge, ever-expanding inventories.

A few of the major cable channels, including **HBO**, (www.hbo.com), **Showtime** (www.sho.com), and **Starz** (www.starz.com), have long produced original programming and now also offer streaming subscriptions or on-demand viewing. They have massive websites offering clips, numerous background pieces and often entire episodes to entice viewers.

Other specialized brands like **National Geographic**, (video.nationalgeographic.com) and the **History Channel** (www.history.com), are also doing the same. **Comedy Central** (www.comedycentral.com), in particular offers many of their shows online for free. This has inspired websites such as the famous news-parody, **The Onion**, (www.theonion.com) to make their own, and the trend is definitely growing.

Some commercial networks have teamed up to make their own hosting site. **Hulu**, (www.hulu.com), carries a diverse variety of network and cable programming, movies from major studios, and even games, and had almost half a billion views last year. With 38 million viewers, 4 million of which are paying subscribers, Hulu has become a popular, inexpensive alternative to broadcast TV for many busy viewers.



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More fun for free

The good news is that there are an unbelievable amount of shows online, both amateur and professionally produced, and like commercial TV, much of it is available for putting up with ads (and your data). **YouTube**, (www.youtube.com), is the largest. With over a billion unique videos, 72 hours more are uploaded *every single minute*. And there are more ways of watching them too: three times as many were viewed over mobile devices last year as in 2011.

On YouTube, viewers can explore lists and communities or make up their own – and even create and upload their own videos. There are some limits, such as how long and what format, and submitters will sign away rights but they could also make money once their cat video goes viral around the globe.

YouTube is so big it offers thousands of **channels**. These aren't networks, but content producers in every field imaginable. Everyone from North Korea to Monty Python has them. Some are educational, like the famous **Khan Academy**, which can tutor students so they won't forget their lessons over vacation or make further progress in many academic subjects.

YouTube also hosts many hard-to-find full length **foreign films**. Plus YouTube and other sites allow some videos to be **embedded** in other people's webpages, which makes them available to all kinds of audiences.

Though immense, YouTube is certainly not alone. Hosting sites abound, many with oddly similar names such as **Vevo** (www.vevo.com) or music site **Veoh**, (www.veoh.com), both general similar to YouTube but without some of its length and other limits. **Veehd** (veehd.com), boasts of its artistic origins and excellent videos. Some sites tack on ads in various ways or may require subscription fees, like **Vimeo** (www.vimeo.com), which claims very high quality programming but has two levels of paid service.

Every month, 40 million viewers visit **Metacafe**, (www.metacafe.com) for free popular entertainment including movies and games, but also TV shows, music, and sports. Unlike YouTube, there are no duplicate files, and everything is ranked. Metacafe is also experimenting with producing original content, and pays for user-made popular videos, too.

Looking for something different? There are huge collections, held by both the **National Film Board of Canada** (www.nfb.ca) and especially the **Internet Archive** (archive.org) of great old documentaries,


historical films, even long-forgotten cartoons. The Archive is an incredible trove of well over a million videos and even more audio files, including over 100,000 concert recordings. There are also 4 million books in various formats from libraries across the continent, also free for downloading. And if that weren't enough, its **Wayback Machine** maintains almost 350 billion webpages from sites gone by.

Surfing safely

Since the Internet is interactive and largely unregulated, it's possible for people looking for a good time to get into serious trouble. **Torrents** and **file-sharing** can be particularly risky because users tend to assume anonymity they don't really possess. Yet even on YouTube, videos are often quickly pulled or blocked due to **DMCA takedown notices** and the like. Copyright-violating uploaders or those posting inappropriate material can be banned or even subjected to real-life legal penalties, sometimes severe.

There are lots of **link directories** on the Web, specialized lists pointing to videos hosted at sites like YouTube. Some can be useful, such as **Documentary List** (www.documentarylist.net). It's just that: it doesn't carry any shows, but crowd-sourced links to all kinds of highbrow subjects viewers found online.

Other places may be more suspect. Some, like **Watch Free Movies Online** (watch-free-movie-online.net) sound too good to be true. But it mainly lists B-list flicks from sites from which files can be downloaded, often requiring registration or membership. Some of these sites may be spammers, some might post illegal content. In particular, be careful of *any* software that needs to be downloaded and installed to play the video as it may contain malware.

Finally, gizmos like **Boxee** (www.boxee.tv) can simplify enjoyment. It allows users to stream broadcast videos to any screen from the cloud. The Net is not TV, but they're getting closer all the time. 



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