

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## 3 Things Indie Video Stores Can Teach Netflix

Adam Leipzig · Thursday, September 15th, 2011

The big green banner says it all. Soon Rocket Video, LA's next-to-last great independent video store, will be no more. What we lose isn't easily replicated by online and cable video distribution – and it shows what Netflix and others could focus on to take their businesses to the next level.

Obviously, there are plenty of other places to get content. At Rocket, I bought a couple of (Pasolini's *Decameron* and Rohmer's *Perceval*) because the last time I checked, they weren't currently available on home video in this country. When I got home I checked, and they are both on Netflix – *Decameron* via streaming, and *Perceval* by mail. So that's good – although the way some titles fall in and out of rights, especially classic titles, it makes one feel insecure about being able to have everything anytime anywhere, which is the great Cloudy dream.

However, with one movie I want to see on streaming and the other available by mail that means I need to pay for both levels of service, which is \$16 a month. Maybe that doesn't seem like a lot to some people, but it adds up to nearly \$200 a year. In comparison, I pre-paid for passes to 100 movies at Rocket for less than that, and it took far longer than a year to go through them. So I will be paying more to get the same thing.

Beyond price, though, it is a matter of context. There are three significant contexts I got with Rocket that I cannot get anywhere online or through my home entertainment systems. These context areas suggest where the industry needs to move to create the next level of user experience:

**1. Human context:** There's something intriguing and textured about the “staff picks” or “Sarah's favorite” that you get at a local bookstore or video store. A real person, with whom you can interact, has given you her or his own taste – gone out on a limb and said, “I like this and you should see it too.” This is *not* the same as peer-recommendation engines (“Customers who bought this item also bought...” says Amazon). Peers are peers. And those recommendations engines, while generally good, don't lend the level of surprise. They're like masturbation – where you control everything and get what you expect – rather than sex with another human, where there are surprises and unexpected moves. The creative experience moves down to that personal, limbic, sexual place, and that's why I make the analogy. In the online environment, you also don't get the actual sense of a community of people in the store, who may further your sense of exploration and surprise. [Vidiots](#), the last remaining indie video store, stays alive because it has expanded in the direction of community – even adding an annex where people can meet, mingle and learn more about film.

**2. Proximity context:** At Rocket, if you wanted to see a Peter Greenaway movie, they were all sitting on the rack next to each other (when I was there earlier this week, a woman snapped up all the Greenaway DVDs at \$8.99 apiece). There they would be, titles beckoning, inviting you to explore. You might have wanted *Prospero's Books* but if it wasn't there, you might have been intrigued by *Nightwatching*. This unexpected sense of discover, closely related to the human context, created a sense of adventure. Therefore, the *lack* of availability in some ways, occasionally, is more exciting than total availability. The online experience, and instant view, certainly has that too. But it is not contextualized in the same way. You cannot wander the racks looking for *images* that appeal – images say so much more than titles and names.

**3. Event context:** You had to *go to* rocket. I walked there. It took some effort. The effort created a deeper meaning for the experience. The fact that it was harder than buying something on VOD, or switching on TV, or clicking instant download made it.... well, yes, sometimes a bit of a chore, but always a bit of fun too. It created an experiential encounter.



*Last customers buy Rocket Video's inventory.*

Clearly online and in-home distribution is the business model that works. Rocket Video, independent booksellers, and music retailers know that far too well. But for the online environment to be even better – to justify what consumers will pay for their entertainment – Netflix, Hulu, Amazon and the others will need to develop the three contexts: human, proximity and event.

By the way, just because content will cost me more this way, does *not* mean that increased revenue will flow to the artists who create the content. We'll address that another day.

What do you think?

This entry was posted on Thursday, September 15th, 2011 at 10:27 am and is filed under [Film](#), [Technology](#)

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