

addition to editing, he would be responsible for encoding video for the different media players that viewers use to watch Net entertainment. Smith had no previous experience with encoding, but his employers knew he had a good video background and they trusted him enough to learn.

Since the HitPlay launch, Smith has had the opportunity to help produce new footage, work on site design, and outfit HitPlay's new production studio—and his salary is nearly double what he was earning a year ago in traditional film. Smith is very cognizant of the opportunity Net entertainment has afforded him. "[Without the Internet], I would have been an assistant for at least another year, and I'd much rather be working for an Internet company doing something new than working on a late-night cable show," he says.

Above the learning experience, beyond the better pay, Smith cares most about the opportunity to create new visual art through editing, and he believes the web is much more conducive to creativity than traditional media are. "We aren't limited to 100 television channels owned by the same five companies. If you don't have to create something with a broad market in mind, there are fewer limitations. I can have my own voice," he says.

For the future, Smith is seeking new challenges in editing and producing Internet entertainment. No one has yet figured out how to successfully apply the interactive potential of the web to video (nonlinear, interactive storytelling, for example), and Smith recognizes his opportunity. "Right now everything looks a lot like TV, very simple and very digestible and appealing to the broadest number of people possible. I'd really like to be one of the first people to do Internet video successfully," he says.

By 2004 the number of individuals habitually viewing entertainment on the web will exceed 100 million, according to estimates by the Carmel Group, which tracks the ongoing convergence of the telecommunications, computer, and entertainment

industries. By 2007, 85 percent of all U.S. Internet users will enjoy streaming visual media, contributing to a worldwide audience close to 500 million. As we climb toward these numbers, the traditional heavy hitters of the entertainment industry will likely join the throngs, buying out numerous upstarts while forcing others out of

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business. For any individual dot-com, the future is anything but guaranteed. But for people working at these upstarts, that doesn't really matter. Whichever players win out, large or small, old or new, they'll surely be scrambling for the talent—and experience—of the individuals who surfed the first waves of virtual Hollywood. ◀

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At Hitplay.com, Matt Smith (bottom left) has been trusted with real responsibility—and his salary is nearly double what he was earning in traditional film.

