

# MTV's marriage of computer and TV: 'webRIOT' is game

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My final score last Thursday: 2,692 points. Not so good. Especially compared to frontrunner HedStand, who by then had racked up 4,045. But I was happy just to be in the game.

That's the charm of "webRIOT," MTV's new on-air/online music quiz. As the latest leap forward in the race toward media convergence, "webRIOT" lets everyone, on- and off-camera, play.

Well, not exactly everyone. But anyone. Anyone with a TV, a personal computer and Internet access — plus the forethought to log on early enough to be among the maximum of 25,000 who get to compete with the studio contestants. "We wanted to do the definitive music-trivia game show," explains Brian Graden, MTV's programming vice president. "Then we thought, 'Wouldn't it great if everybody could play in their own living rooms?'"

"Then we thought, 'This is the age

of the Internet. It MUST be possible."

Then they spent two long years thinking up how.

"WebRIOT" premiered last week. Airing weekdays at 5 p.m. EST (and at 5 p.m. Pacific in a separate edition for MTV's West Coast feed), it's fun just to watch in couch-potato mode.

What you see is four players in a high-tech setting with TV monitors and silvery hoses that look like heating ducts. They are known only by their online names (on Thursday's show: CheriStem, DaDream, Bruja and the aforementioned HedStand).

The host is Ahmet Zappa — he with the shaved pate and rubber face — who keeps things moving at Pentium velocity. And to reinforce the "virtual" flavor, Zappa interacts with the players not in person, but from a large video screen.

The game is simple. Two rounds of multiple-choice questions pop up during clips from music videos.

Then a speed round between the

two finalists determines the day's champ. The winner of this Los Angeles-based show gets a neat prize ... like maybe a trip to New York City.

Fine. But what if watching from the sidelines isn't enough for you? What if you want to put yourself online and on the line, as a real-time competitor?

Well, MTV wants to serve you. Rick Holzman, vice president of MTV Online, explains that when the network's online division was launched five years ago, "we knew we had the audience that was media-savvy, early adopters, multiexperiential. We said, 'We need to be in this.'"

TV/PC programming hybrids followed: an auction with bids made online; a music-video show with online chat; and, of course, MTV's popular "Total Request Live," in which video requests are submitted via e-mail.

Then "webRIOT" was fomented: "The world's first interactive online television game," as Zappa puts it

at the top of the show.

But to go interactive, you must first go to the webRIOT Web site (webRIOT.MTV.com) and download the necessary software. For me, "downloading software" is the 1990s equivalent of that dismaying phrase "some assembly required." But in this case, everything went smoothly for both me and my computer.

So I was ready the day "webRIOT" premiered and I logged on a good half-hour before airtime. Not good enough. Already 25,000 other viewers had shut me out. The next day, I was there a little earlier, but again the ship had sailed. Wednesday, I got in, but through some sort of glitch I was cut off before the show began.

But last Thursday, success! After logging on an hour beforehand, I was part of the In Crowd when "webRIOT" hit the air.

As the game began, my PC screen cued me what to do and kept a running tally of my score. I typed my answers on my keyboard.

Meanwhile, my eyes and ears could remain fixed on the TV. As someone who can walk and chew gum at the same time, I found it was a snap.

The questions weren't. Sample: In addition to the 1996 inauguration, LL Cool J also performed at Bill Clinton's (1) impeachment hearings; (2) White House Christmas party; (3) 30th wedding anniversary; (4) 50th birthday party.

Not that I knew it, but the correct answer was (4).

During the commercial break, I found myself in a chat room with other online players. I had very little to contribute to their musical discussion and my game score was nothing to brag about. But I did type a jeering response to a commercial for a department store we were all seeing on our respective TVs.

FRAZIER: "Who shops THERE?"

POLO2743: "No one!"

Then I understood, if I hadn't before. "WebRIOT," with its "convergence experience," is kind of silly. But it's pretty cool. And it's the future.

## 'Pokemon' from page 2

definitely the dominant force in the toy industry."

Nowhere is that more obvious than at the Pokemon Center behind Tokyo Station, which is easily identifiable by the lines outside — stretching 400 people or so on weekends.

Along with the standard software, trading cards and action figures, the store carries Pokemon mouse pads, Pokemon cookies, Pokemon spatulas, Pokemon chopsticks.

There are 151 Pokemon characters, ranging from Diglett, a tiny mole-like character, to Onix, with a face that looks like a rock.

Each monster — a misnomer actually, since most of the characters are deliberately cute — has its own powers, which can be enhanced or

changed to battle its opponents.

That means kids have to strategize. And therein lies a large part of the game's appeal: It makes kids think. Pokemon is expected to account for 20 percent of all Christmas toy sales in the United States this year. Its star, the cuddly but deadly Pikachu, has graced the covers of both Time and the New Yorker.

Sales of Pokemon stuff in Japan alone added up to \$5.85 billion last year — but its true significance may transcend mere sales figures.

Japan's economy — just now getting out from under its worst slowdown since World War II, — has lost the shine it once had. So Pokemon's invasion of America is seen by many as evidence that Japan may be down, but certainly isn't out.

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