

NEWS

Getting Another Dose of Reality

CBS and RealNetworks Stream 'Big Brother 2' Live Feeds to Internet Subscribers

by Robert Brilliant

LOS ANGELES

Can a "reality television" get any more "real?" It can — and it has — with the introduction of live round-the-clock programming streamed over the Internet to subscribers. Aficionados of CBS Television's hit reality series "Big Brother 2" can now buy subscriptions to RealNetworks' RealPlayer GoldPass service (at \$9.95/mo) and view four exclusive video feeds, live and uncut, streaming on a 24/7 basis from the Big Brother house. The venture marks the first time that a major U.S. network and a leading Internet media delivery company have joined forces for the live streaming of primetime entertainment programming through a subscription service.

"Big Brother 2" is the second season edition of the Big Brother reality television program that's been a huge hit with audiences around the world for several years. The concept places 12 contestants, all strangers, together in a house wired with ubiquitous video cameras and microphones. During the series the housemates respond to a variety of challenges and rituals within the house. Based on these results and other factors, the housemates vote each week to evict a person from the group. The sole survivor at the end of the series walks away with a cool \$500,000.

From the onset, fans could log on to www.cbs.com for a rich-media Big Brother 2 Internet experience that included detailed

biographies on all the contestants, a 3D virtual tour of the house, a chat room and streaming video clips. CBS, however, wanted to bring serious fans even closer to the Big Brother 2 house via live video streaming.

"We had a choice of just streaming clips and updates like we do on our other program sites or providing live 24/7 streaming to viewers who really wanted it," said David Katz, CBS vice president of Strategic Planning and Interactive Ventures. "Despite the still high cost of streaming video, we elected to give viewers this opportunity."

ENTER THE GOLDPASS

RealNetworks' RealPlayer GoldPass subscription service was seen as a viable solution for bringing high-cost live streaming video to the Big Brother 2 site. Since its inception last August, the GoldPass service has grown to more than 200,000 subscribers who receive, for their \$9.95 monthly fee, access to exclusive streaming content from Major League Baseball, NBA basketball and a variety of other entertainment and news offerings.

Mark Hall, vice president of Programming at RealNetworks, likens the GoldPass to the streaming industry's first "cable model" subscription service. "GoldPass is the first broad



package that brings a variety of streaming programming from different channel partners into one monthly subscription offering," Hall said. "I think that CBS was intrigued when we suggested incorporating Big Brother 2 streaming video within the GoldPass subscription plan instead of just offering it for free. It's since become the first primetime show extended into the Internet and offered as a subscription product."

THE SET-UP

The streams originate from four video cameras placed within the Big Brother 2 house. The cameras and the control and routing of the video signals are the responsibility of CBS. Real Broadcast Network (RBN), the content delivery network division of RealNetworks Inc., delivers

the four 24/7 video feeds from CBS Studio City's back lot via satellite directly to RBN's Seattle hub using standard broadcasting techniques. These feeds are multiplexed together at the uplink facility and received at RBN where they are decoded back into separate feeds.

Once decoded, the feeds are converted to Serial Digital Interface format and passed through RBN's routing system into the network's SDI capable encoders. The feeds stream out over the Internet at broadband and narrowband bit rates.

According to Mark Warner, director of Broadcasting at RBN, the biggest challenge his team faced was the quick turnaround for getting the feeds up and running once the agreement between RealNetworks and CBS was made. Within a two-week period RBN had to lay lines, install the local loops to the uplink and secure satellite time. The tight schedule was met with technical solutions from Nexustar of New York, CBS, Snell & Wilcox, Philips Broadcast Solutions and Pinnacle Systems. The live Big Brother 2 streams debuted on the CBS.com site on July 5th for a three-day free trial with subscription service beginning July 9th.

Though it's too soon to assess the programming and economic performance of the Big Brother 2 subscription streaming, the initial chat room feedback from viewers and the excellent technical quality of the streams

themselves have been encouraging to both CBS and RealNetworks.

"We're in uncharted waters right now," said

time we'll look for ways to provide streaming that makes sense for our shareholders and our viewers. Subscription services like GoldPass

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CBS' Katz, "but I'd rather be out there trying to provide value to viewers and trying to find out what services work than sitting back and not even experimenting. Clearly our business is still getting viewers to the television screen but we'll continue to look at the evolving Internet landscape and see where it makes sense to provide other streaming opportunities. It would be a very different story if the cost of bandwidth went to zero for video. But until that

may be an answer. In the meantime we're focused on making the live streaming of Big Brother 2 work and work well."

This experimental spirit was echoed by RealNetworks' Hall, who noted that the basic streaming subscription service pioneered by the GoldPass program may, over time, evolve into any number of pay-per-view and pay-to-own models for accessing streaming content. ■