computers are bad

2023-10-15 go.com

Correction: a technical defect in my Enterprise Content Management System resulted in the email having a subject that made it sound like this post would be about the classic strategy game Go. It is actually about a failed website. I regret the error; the responsible people have been sacked. The link in the email was also wrong but I threw in a redirect so I probably would have gotten away with the error if I weren't telling you about it now.

The late 1990s were an exciting time in technology, at least if you don't look too late. The internet, as a consumer service, really hit its stride as major operating systems incorporated network stacks and shipped with web browsers, dial-up consumer ISPs proliferated, and the media industry began to view computers as a new medium for content delivery.

It was also a chaotic time: the internet was very new to consumers, and no one was quite sure how best to structure it. "Walled garden" services like AOL and Compuserve had been the first to introduce most people to internet usage. These early providers viewed the "open" internet of standard protocols to be more commercial or academic, and less friendly to consumers. They weren't entirely wrong, although they clearly had other motives as well to keep users within their properties. Whether for good or for ill, these early iterations of "the internet" as a social concept presented a relatively tightly curated experience.

Launching AOL's bespoke browser, for example, one was presented with a "home page" that gave live content like news headlines, features like IM and search, and then a list of websites neatly organized into categories and selected by human judgment. To make a vague analogy, the internet was less like an urban commercial district and more like a mall: there existed the same general concept of the internet connecting you to services operated by diverse companies, but there was a management company guiding and policing what those services were. There was less crime and vice, but also just less in general.

By the mid-'90s, the dominance of these closed networks was faltering. Dial-up access to "the internet proper" became readily available from incumbent players like telephone companies. Microsoft invested heavily in the Information Superhighway, launching MSN as a competitor to AOL that provided direct access to the internet through a lightly managed experience with some of the friendliness of AOL but the power of the full internet. Media companies tended to prefer the open internet because of the lower cost of access and freedom from constraints imposed by internet operators. There was more crime, but also more vice, and we know today that vice is half the point of the internet anyway [1].

There was a problem with the full-on internet experience, though: where to start? The internet itself is more like a telephone than a television---it doesn't give you anything until you dial a number. Some attacked this problem the same way the telephone industry did, by publishing books with lists of websites. "As easy to use as your telephone book," the

description of The Internet Directory (1993) claims, a statement that tells us a lot about the consumer information experience of the time.

From a modern perspective the whole book thing seems nonsensical... to deliver information about the internet, why not use the internet? That's what services like AOL had done with their home pages. On the open internet, anyone could offer users a home page, regardless of their ISP. It was a solid idea at the time: Yahoo built its homepage into a business that stayed solid for years. Microsoft's MSN was never quite the independent commercial success of Yahoo, but has the unusual distinction of being one of the few other homepages that's still around today.

Much like the closed services that preceded them, homepage or portal providers tried to give their users the complete internet experience in one place. That meant that email was a standard offering, as was search. Search is unsurprising but email seems a bit odd, when you could use any old email service. But remember, the idea of using an independent service just for email was pretty much introduced to the masses by GMail. Before Google's breakout success, most people used the email account provided by either their ISP (for example Earthlink and Qwest addresses) or their homepage (Yahoo or Hotmail) [2].

Search quickly became an important factor in homepage success as well, being a much easier experience than browsing through a topic tree. It's no surprise, then, that the most successful homepage companies endure (at least to some degree) as search providers today.

Homepages started out as an internet industry concept, but the prominence of Yahoo and MSN in this rapidly expanding new media was a siren call to major, incumbent media companies. Whether by in-house development or acquisition, they wanted to have their own internet portals. They didn't tend to succeed.

A notable early example is Pathfinder, Time Warner's contender. Pathfinder developed some content in house but mostly took advantage of its shared ownership with Time Magazine to present exclusive news and entertainment. Time Warner put a large team and an ample budget behind Pathfinder, and it utterly failed. Surviving only from '94 to '99, Pathfinder is one of the notable busts of the Dot Com era. It had just about zero impact besides consuming a generous portion of Time Warner's money.

There were other efforts in motion, though. Paul Allen, better remembered today as the owner of several professional sports teams and even more yachts [3], had a side business in the mid-'90s called Starwave. Starwave developed video games and had some enduring impact in that industry through their early massively multiplayer game Castle Infinity. More importantly, though, Starwave was a major early web design firm. Web design, in say '95, was rather different from what it is today. There were no major off-the-shelf content management systems. Websites were either maintained, per-page, by hand, or generated by an in-house CMS. Websites with large amounts of regularly-updated content, typical of news and media companies, presented a real technical challenge and required a staff of engineers. Starwave provided those engineers, and they scored a very big client: the Walt Disney Company.

In 1996, Disney had just acquired ownership of Capital Cities Communications. You probably haven't heard of Capital Cities, but you have heard of their two major subsidiaries, ABC and ESPN. Disney's new subsidiary Walt Disney Television was a cable giant, and one focused on news and sports, two industries with a lot of rapidly updating content. The climate of the time demanded that they become not only major cable channels, but also major websites. Near-live sports scores, even just returns posted shortly after the end of games, were a big innovation in a time when you had to wait for scores to come around on the radio, or for the paper to come the next morning.

Starwave was a successful internet firm, and as was the way for successful internet companies even in the '90s, it had an Exit. Their biggest client, Disney, bought them.

At nearly the same time, Disney took interest in another burgeoning internet company: search engine Infoseek. Infoseek was one of the major search engines of the pre-Google internet, not quite with the name recognition of Ask Jeeves but prominent because of its default status in Netscape Navigator. Disney acquired Infoseek in 1999.

Here I have to take a brief break to disclose that I have lied to you for the sake of simplicity: What I'm about to describe actually started as a joint venture prior to Disney's acquisition of Starwave and Infoseek, but only very shortly. I suspect that M&A negotiations were already in progress when the joint venture was established, so we'll just say that Disney bought these companies and then the rest of this article happened. Okay? I'm sorry. '90s tech industry M&A happened so fast in so many combinations that it's often difficult to tell a tight story.

Disney was far from immune to the homepage mania that brought us Pathfinder. If they were going to have popular websites, they needed a way to get consumers to them, and "type espn.com into your web browser" was still a little iffy as an advertising call to action. A homepage of their own would provide the easiest path for users, and give Disney leverage to build their other internet projects. Disney got a homepage of their own: The Go Network, go.com.

Remember these acquisitions? Yahoo was a popular home page, and Yahoo had a search engine. Well, now Disney had a search engine. They had Starwave, developer of their largest web properties, on board as well. Disney had a plan: they took every internet venture under their corporate umbrella and combined them into what they hoped would be a dot com giant: The Go.com Company.

Disney's venture to combine their internet properties was impressively complete, especially considering their slow pace of change today. Just like Pathfinder's leverage of Time, Disney would use ESPN and ABC as ready sources of first-party content. Their combining of efforts was impressively complete, especially considering Disney's slow pace of online change today. Over the span of 1999, every Disney web property became just part of the go.com behemoth. And go.com would not be behind Yahoo on features: it had search, and you can bet it had email. Perhaps the only major Internet feature it was missing was instant messaging, but it wasn't yet quite the killer app it was in the '00s and Disney is famously allergic to IM (due to the abuse potential) anyway.

In true '90s fashion, go.com even got a volunteer-curated directory of websites in the style of DMOZ. These seem a bit odd today but were popular at the time, sort of the open internet response to AOL's tidy shopping mall.

Pathfinder made it from '94 to '99. Launched in '99, go.com was a slow start but a fast finish. In January of '00, they announced a pivot. "Internet site will quit portal race," the lede of 2000 AP piece starts. Maybe Disney saw the fallout of Pathfinder, in any case by '99 the writing was on the wall for the numerous homepage contenders that hadn't yet gained traction. Part of the reason was Google: Google took a gamble that consumers didn't really want news and a directory all in one place; they just wanted search. For novice internet users, Google might have actually been more approachable than "easy" options like Yahoo, due its extremely minimal design. Most home pages were, well, noisy [4].

Go.com's 21st century strategy would be to focus on entertainment. It might seem pretty obvious that Disney, an entertainment behemoth, should focus its online efforts on entertainment. But it was a different time! The idea of the internet being a bunch of different websites was still sort of uncomfortable, industry wanted to build the website, not

just a website. Of course the modern focus on "everything apps," motivated mostly by the more recent success of this "homepage" concept in the form of mobile apps in China, shows that business ideas are evergreen.

Go.com's new focus didn't go well either. Continuing their impressively rapid pace of change for the worse (a true model of "move fast and break things"), go.com suffered a series of scandals. First, the go.com logo was suspiciously similar to the logo of similarly named but older homepage competitor goto.com. A judge agreed the resemblance was more than coincidental and ordered Disney to pay $21.5 million in damages. Almost in the same news cycle, an executive vice president of Infoseek, kept on as a Disney executive, traveled across state lines in pursuit of unsavory activities with a 13 year old. In a tale perhaps literally as old as the internet, said 13 year old was a good deal older than 13 and, even more to the EVP's dismay, a special agent of the FBI.

The widespread news coverage of the scandal was difficult for Disney's famously family friendly image. Newspaper articles quoted anonymous Starwave, Infoseek, and Disney employees describing the "high-flying," "high-testosterone" culture and a company outing to a strip club. "Everyone is going for gold. It's causing people to live in the present and disregard actions that could lead to real harm," one insider opined. The tone of the coverage would have fit right into an article about a collapsed crypto company were it not for a trailing short piece about upstart amazon.com introducing a multi-seller marketplace called "zShops."

The rapid decline seemed to continue. In January 2001, just another year later, Disney announced the end of go.com. They would charge off $800 million in investment and lay off 400. Go.com had been the ninth most popular website but a commercial failure, truly a humbling reminder of the problems of online monetization.

Here, though, things take a strange turn. After go.com's rapid plummet it achieved what we might call a zombie state. Just a couple of months later, in March, Disney announced a stay of execution for go.com. The $800 million had been marked down and the 400 employees laid off, but now that go.com had no staff and no budget to speak of, it just didn't cost that much to run.

Ironically, considering the trademark suit a year earlier, Disney's cost cutting included a complete shutdown of the former Infoseek search engine. Its replacement: goto.com, providing go.com search results under contract. In a Bloomberg piece, one analyst admits "I don't understand it." Another, Jeffrey Vilensky, gets at exactly what brings me to this topic: "People have definitely heard of Go, although there's been so many rounds of changes that people probably don't understand what it is or what to do with it at this point." Well, I'm not sure that Disney did either, because what they did was evidently to abandon it in place.

The odd thing about go.com is that, like Yahoo and MSN, it has survived to the modern age. But not as a homepage. The expenses, low as they were, must have added up, because Disney ended the go.com email service in 2010 and the whole search-and-news homepage content in 2013.

But it's still there: to this day, nearly every Disney website is a subdomain of go.com. Go.com itself, apparently the top level of Disney's empire, is basically nothing. A minimally designed page with a lazily formatted list of all of the websites under it. Go.com used to be a homepage, a portal, a search engine, the capital of Disney's empire. Today, it's tech debt.

Go.com is not quite eternal. As early as 2014 some motion had apparently begun to move away from it. ESPN no longer uses espn.go.com, they now just use espn.com (which for many years had been a 301 redirect to the former). ABC affiliate stations have stopped using the abclocal.go.com domain they used to be awkwardly organized under, but the website of ABC News itself remains abcnews.go.com. I mostly encounter this oddity of the internet in the context of my unreasonable love of themed entertainment; the online presence of the world's most

famous theme parks are anchored at disneyland.disney.go.com and disneyworld.disney.go.com.

This is an odd thing, isn't it, in the modern context where domain hierarchies are often viewed as poison to consumer internet user. There are affordances to modernity, disney.com is Disney's main website even though a large portion of the links are to subdomains of disney.go.com. Disney.go.com itself actually redirects to disney.com, reversing the historic situation. Newer Disney websites, like Disney Plus, get their own top-level domains, as do all of the companies acquired by Disney after the go.com debacle.

But go.com is still a critical structural element of the Walt Disney online presence.

So what's up with that? A reading between the lines of Wikipedia and a bit of newspaper coverage suggests one motivation. Go.com had a user profile system that functioned as an early form of SSO for various Disney properties, and it has apparently been a protracted process to back out of that situation. I assume they relied on the shared go.com domain to make cookies available to their various properties. That system was apparently replaced when ESPN shifted to espn.com in 2016, but perhaps it's still in use by the Disney Resorts properties? I won't claim that technologies like OIDC or SAML are straightforward, a large portion of my day job is troubleshooting them, but still, over 20 years should be long enough to make a transition to a cross-domain SSO architecture.

There are rumors that the situation is related to SEO, that Disney fears the loss of reputation from moving their properties to new domains. But when ESPN moved they dismissed that claim, and it doesn't seem that likely given the range of SEO techniques available to handle content moves. Do they worry about consumer behavior? Sure, people don't like it when domain names change [5], but is anyone really typing "disneyland.disney.go.com" into their URL bar in the era of unified search? There are bookmarks for sure, but 20 years is a long timeline to transition via redirects.

I assume it's just been a low priority. The modern reality of Disney and go.com is idiosyncratic and anachronistic, but it doesn't cause many problems. Search easily gets you to the right place, and obvious domain names (like disneyland.com) are redirects. Go.com is an incredible domain name undoubtedly worth millions today but Disney could probably never sell it, there would always be too many concerns around old bookmarks, missed links in Disney marketing materials, and so on.

And so here we are, go.com still the sad shade of a major internet portal. Join with me for a little bit of ceremony, a way that we honor our shared internet history and its particular traditions. Set your homepage to go.com.

[1] One is tempted to make a connection to the largely mythical story that VHS succeeded over Betamax because of its availability to the pornography industry. We know this urban legend to be questionable in part because there were adult films sold on Betamax; not as many as on VHS, but probably for the same reasons there weren't as many Betamax releases of any type. This invites the question: was smut a factor in the victory of the open internet over closed providers? Look forward to a lengthier investigation of this topic on my onlyfans.

[2] The lines here are a bit blurrier than I present them, because most major homepage providers had partnerships with ISPs to sell internet service under their brand. MSN, for example, had some presence as a pseudo-ISP because of Microsoft's use of Windows defaults to market it. This whole idea of defaults being an important aspect of consumer choice for internet homepages is, ironically, once again being litigated in federal court as I write.

[3] This is a joke. Paul Allen was a founder of Microsoft.

[4] Ironically, Google themselves would launch their own home page product in 2005. It was

called iGoogle, an incredibly, tragically 2005 name. Its differentiator was customization; but other homepage websites like Yahoo also had customization by that point and it doesn't seem to have been enough to overcome the general tide against this type of website. Google discontinued it in 2013. That's actually still a pretty good lifespan for a Google product.

[5] see, for example, my ongoing complaints about Regrid, a useful service for cadastral data that I sometimes have a hard time physically finding because they are on at least their third name and domain.