

Review: Hulu Plus takes television to your pocket

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In this Nov. 11, 2009 file screen grab, the home page of Hulu.com, is shown. (AP Photo/Hulu)

(AP) -- Hulu, the popular website with TV shows, now comes as a subscription-based application for iPhones and iPads. Although it isn't perfect, it works well enough that it may make you wonder if the TV's reign as the center of family life is coming to an end.

Instead of gathering to turn our faces to the blue glow of the living-room set, maybe we'll curl up, each in our own little world, with a phone or tablet in our lap. They don't look as good as HDTVs, but we won't have to fight over remotes any more. An [iPhone](#) held 7.5 inches from my eye looks just as big as a 46-inch TV, 10 feet away.

This comes just as many of us have invested in a humungous flat-panel TV, so it doesn't sound like good news (TV manufacturers, of course, are trying to convince you that your TV isn't 3-D, it's already obsolete). As a consolation, consider that [Hulu](#) and a few other online video services are now also available for Internet-connected TVs and Blu-ray players. It's coming to game consoles as well, starting with the [PlayStation 3](#) later this year.

Hulu's website is free and gathers shows from ABC, Fox and NBC, including "Glee," "The Office," and "House." Generally, shows are available starting the day after they air, and for a few weeks after that.

With Hulu Plus, you get:

- The ability to play the shows on iPhone models 3GS and 4, iPads, iPod Touches from September or later, and some high-end Samsung TVs and Blu-ray players.
- Entire seasons of shows, current and past.
- Some shows in high definition, if you're watching on a TV or computer screen.

Hulu Plus is still in "preview," and you can't just sign up like that. You supply your e-mail address to Hulu.com, and they send you an invite, but that can take weeks.

The bigger catch is that Hulu Plus costs \$9.99 per month and still shows the same amount of ads as the free version. This is not going down well with people - the user reviews in Apple's App Store are scathing. Yet these are, presumably, the same people who pay for cable TV channels that also show ads.

I'm not morally outraged that Hulu Plus costs money. But a fair question is whether it's worth it. Streaming movies from Netflix are now available for all the Hulu Plus gadgets except the iPhone and iPod Touch. It's already available on more TVs and game consoles, plus standalone devices such as the Roku Player. Netflix costs a dollar less at \$8.99 a month and doesn't carry any ads. You get DVDs by mail in the bargain.

Another option is MobiTV, which has been providing live TV to cell phones for years. They came out with an iPhone app in April. It costs \$9.99 per month and will be the obvious pick for sports fans and news junkies, though the video quality is far below that of Hulu and the selection of "on demand" content is small.

I'd argue that Netflix is the best deal, if all you have to spend on Internet video is \$10 per month. That's because you get vastly more to watch. Hulu has few movies, and you probably haven't heard of them.

Another catch with Hulu Plus is that not all of the programming available on the Hulu site is available through the apps. If you search the site for "The Daily Show with Jon Stewart," it will take you to Comedy Central's Web page, where the shows will play. But because they're not really on Hulu, they're not available at all through the apps.

However, if you want to keep up with watercooler chat, Hulu is the only option, because Netflix gets TV shows about the time they come out on DVD. Also, there is no iPhone app for Netflix.

And Hulu's iPhone app is cool. Viewing TV on cell phones has been possible for a while, but it hasn't exactly caught fire. The iPhone app might change that. It works not just over Wi-Fi, but also over AT&T's 3G network. The quality will vary with the connection, but I got watchable quality every time on an iPhone 4 in New York. It looked as if I would get about four hours of viewing on one battery charge.

There were some minor problems with the iPhone app; it sometimes refused to acknowledge that I had turned the phone to the horizontal orientation, and there was occasionally a loss of synchronization between audio and video.

The [iPad](#) is a more enjoyable platform, because of the comfortable size of the screen - 9.7 inches diagonally. Over Wi-Fi, the picture is sharp and pleasing. My only complaints are the iPad's glossy screen, which easily picks up reflections, and the placement of the speaker at one edge of the unit.

If you do watch over 3G, be sure you know which data plan you're on. An hour of watching consumed 270 megabytes in my test, enough to blow past the 200 megabyte monthly allotment on the \$15-per-month data plan. You'll want at least the \$25-per-month, 2 gigabyte plan (2,000 megabytes) or even better, the old \$30 unlimited data plan. AT&T doesn't offer the unlimited plan to new customers, but you can keep it if you have it, even if you're getting a new phone.

I also tried the app on a \$3,000, 55-inch TV from Samsung, a UN55C8000. Here, the difference in quality between the high-definition shows on Hulu and the roughly DVD-quality movies on Netflix is quite apparent. Dark areas of the image still show some loss of nuance, so there is no mistaking Hulu for a Blu-ray disc, but it's quite watchable even on a big screen. Finding shows is harder with a remote than with a keyboard, but users of digital video recorders will be familiar with this problem already.

Samsung TVs and Blu-ray players are the only ones that will play Hulu Plus for now, but other brands will get on the bandwagon this fall. Of course, this will only apply to "Internet connected" TVs. Others can get Hulu through game consoles and Blu-ray players.

Hulu on the go is the real revelation. If AT&T's network can keep up with the traffic, Hulu Plus will be a good companion on trips and end the time-consuming process of buying shows on iTunes, then syncing them with the iPhone. Less work, more instant gratification - isn't that what TV is all about?

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