

Review: Sea of rights limits March Madness digital

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This computer screen shot from Turner Sports shows shows the Cincinnati-Ohio State game from Thursday, March 22, as shown on the March Madness Live app on an iPad. Live video is at the center, while stats and fan tweets are on either side. (AP Photo/Turner Sports)

(AP) -- Madness is one way to describe my experience with March Madness Live, a service for watching the annual college basketball tournament on computers and mobile devices.

Don't get me wrong. The features were great, and video quality was decent. But it wasn't easy figuring out how to get the games I was entitled to watch for free.

CBS and Turner Sports were smart to continue offering live [video](#)

[coverage](#) beyond the TV. After all, many of the tournament's early games took place during the workday, when many people aren't near TVs or don't want to make it too obvious they're goofing off.

What's changed is that there's now a fee to watch the games via March Madness Live, with some exceptions. Fans may detest having to pay for something that used to be free, but \$3.99 for all 67 men's games is a good deal. It's a one-time fee, so you don't get charged again for the [iPad](#) if you've already paid for access on the computer.

- ON COMPUTERS:

March Madness Live offers extensive access to the tournament, starting with the March 11 selections of teams and concluding with a practice session this Friday and the Final Four on Saturday and Monday.

Visit <http://ncaa.com/march-madness> to launch March Madness Live in a separate browser window.

From there, you can get a schedule of games and check your picks. You get displays of both teams' Twitter feeds and tools for easily posting messages or video clips on [Facebook](#) or Twitter.

You can watch any of the games live or get a full replay afterward, all with commercials. Unfortunately, you can't pause or rewind live video. It felt like TV before I bought a [TiVo](#) digital-video recorder in 2001. Stats on individual players are also available, and a scoreboard at the top gives you frequent updates to other games.

For those at work, hitting the "Boss Button" temporarily replaces the video window with a fake email, including a humorous one pretending to be a scam to get your password information for March Madness Live. Or you can play it safe and just listen to audio produced for radio stations,

while pretending to be stuck in an endless conference call.

Here's where it got confusing.

All games broadcast live on CBS are available for free on computers, though only from CBSSports.com and not the March Madness Live service. Games shown on Turner cable channels TBS, TNT and truTV require a subscription - the one-time fee of \$3.99 or an existing TV subscription with a cable or satellite TV company (an Internet subscription isn't enough).

But not all subscribers are created equal.

If you paid the \$3.99, then you have full access.

If you're an existing TV subscriber, it depends which provider you have. Some subscribers have been able to watch games through their providers' websites after logging in to verify they are customers. Others had to figure out which Turner channel a particular [game](#) was on, go to its website and enter credentials - in my case, information that matched my billing records on file. That got me access on computers, but not on [mobile devices](#).

To add to the confusion, replays of full games always require a \$3.99 upgrade, regardless of the network.

When I first tried to watch video on March Madness Live, I was asked for my credit card information. I had to do a Google search to learn that I could watch on computers for free, but elsewhere.

Why make it difficult to watch video I'm already entitled to as a paying cable subscriber?

- APPLE'S IPAD

The app is free, but watching video of the games costs money. The \$3.99 fee applies regardless of whether you are already a cable subscriber or which network is carrying the game. (The exception is when a provider offers the games through its own mobile app, but it's not even clear if any does. That's how confusing this all is.)

The experience on March Madness Live's iPad app is slightly richer than on the desktop, with more prominent access to social media features. You also have options for getting alerts when there's a close game, a potential upset or when a game goes into overtime. You can set the app to alert you when your favorite team is about to start playing. These alerts appear on your device when you're not using the March Madness Live app.

What you don't get are replays of past games. You're told you can watch highlights at NCAA.com, but there's no link to get you there. Because of that, I see the iPad app as more of a backup when you're away from a computer - or if your employer blocks access to [March Madness](#).

- SMARTPHONES

Apps are available for the iPhone and Android devices. Once again, installing the app is free, but you need a subscription to get live video.

The features are similar to those on the iPad. Because the screen is smaller, some of the features such as social media aren't as easy to find and access. But they are there if you look hard enough. Where the phone apps do better is in their ability to display highlights of past games right from the app. Like the iPad, there's no full replay of past games.

You probably wouldn't want to watch a full game on the phone in any

case, but I appreciate having that choice -and I don't mind paying for that option.

In fact, \$3.99 is a bargain compared with monthly cable bills that exceed \$70 on average. Live sports coverage is one of the few reasons people need cable TV these days. Don't tell the cable guy, but I'd quickly drop my cable service if more of these online packages become available.

That said, taking advantage of what you've paid for is more difficult than it needs to be, given the labyrinth of broadcast rights spread across multiple networks and cable providers. Besides the confusion over what works where, I'm disappointed the service doesn't include any of the women's games. Rights for those are with ESPN, which has its own system for offering the 63 women's games online and on devices.

I have to commend Turner Sports for showing some flexibility. Initially, the free video was supposed to be limited to certain providers. Turner ultimately decided to open that up to everyone, even if it didn't make it easy to get there. Turner promises next year's experience will be better as technology and user comfort improves.

Broadcasters' willingness to charge for online video this year shows how far audiences have come to accept and depend on it. I've seen complaints about the fees online. Rather than complain, fans should focus on making sure Turner and other networks make these types of experiences more seamless in the future.

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