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Potluck for the Eyeballs: Amazon's Streaming Service

By **DAVID POGUE**

In the olden days, bargains added spice to life. You'd get a free toaster with a new bank account, or a collectible drinking glass with a gas fill-up. Old-timers even claim that at one time, you got free meals on airplanes.

Today, most of that is gone — but streaming movie plans are still around.

Netflix, for example, offers a huge catalog of on-demand movies and TV shows. You can watch as many of them as you want for a fixed \$8 a month. For less than the price of a single movie ticket, you can watch movies until your eyeballs fall out.

Of course, you need a fast Internet connection. You don't get any DVD extras, like featurettes or director commentaries. The picture quality generally isn't even as good as a DVD, let alone a Blu-ray disc.

Still, this service has become hugely popular; Netflix's army of 27 million streaming-video subscribers dwarfs its 9 million DVD-by-mail members. Incredibly, Netflix video streams make up one-quarter of all Internet data transmitted in North America.

The service has had a huge cultural impact. It's led many people to cancel their cable TV service. (Netflix has "30 Rock," "Lost," "The Office," "Mythbusters," "Monk," "Glee," "South Park," "Downton Abbey" and dozens of other complete series.)

And it's popularized "binge viewing." That's when people watch multiple seasons of a TV show, nonstop, commercial-free, back to back, as their mail piles up and lawns get reclaimed by nature.

So it didn't take long for rivals to start sniffing out the same territory. Big ones, like **Amazon**.

Instead of paying Netflix \$8 a month, you get Amazon's streaming-movie service free with the purchase of an Amazon Prime membership — \$79 a year. (That comes out to \$6.58 a month, although you can't actually pay monthly.)

Prime membership started out as an attractive option for people who shop a lot on Amazon: for \$79 a year, you get free two-day shipping on almost any purchase (or \$4 overnight). Then Amazon

added those streaming movies to the Prime perks, and then added one free Kindle e-book rental a month.

Random, right? It's like a Fruit of the Month Club membership that comes with free oil changes, ski socks and tax advice.

Still, Prime is a great deal. Even if you don't care about free shipping or e-book downloads, you're getting unlimited movies for less than Netflix's \$8 a month.

So is that it, then? Has Amazon turned Netflix's streaming-movie plan into an overpriced relic of 2010?

Not unless you're getting the same thing for the money. To determine that, you have to ask three questions: What is there to watch? Where can you watch it? And what's the experience of watching like?

WHAT TO WATCH First of all, let's get some expectation-setting out of the way.

Streaming-movie services have hundreds of good movies — but the catalogs lack far more than they stock. In other words, you'll always be able to find something good to watch, but don't expect to find a particular movie.

Most of the movies are old. On Netflix, for example, there's lots of great stuff: “Chinatown,” “The Big Lebowski,” “Office Space,” “The Graduate,” “Breakfast at Tiffany's,” “Sling Blade,” “Being John Malkovich,” “Memento,” and on and on.

But recent stuff is sparser. There are a few brand-name, late-model movies — “Thor,” “Captain America,” “Super 8,” “Limitless,” “The Rum Diary,” “The Lincoln Lawyer” — but not much else you've heard of from 2011 or 2012. There are no “Harry Potter,” “Pirates of the Caribbean,” “Mission: Impossible” or “Twilight” movies. Nothing from Pixar, either, although Netflix gets DreamWorks Animation movies next year.

Netflix used to have many more recent movies, thanks to now-expired deals with companies like Starz. Lately, its emphasis has moved to TV shows; in four years, its TV-to-movies ratio has shifted from 20/80 to 60/40. It has exclusive deals with AMC (so you get “Mad Men” and “Breaking Bad”) and the CW network (“90210” and “The Vampire Diaries”).

Netflix is even producing its own TV shows now — for example, a 13-part political thriller, “House of Cards,” directed by David Fincher, and a reboot of “Arrested Development” (genius!). You'll have to be a Netflix subscriber to see those.

Amazon's collection is similar: you can always find good movies there, but nothing recent, and they are surrounded by mountains of no-name chaff. The recognizable names include the “Matrix” movies, two of the “Mission: Impossible” movies, and the greatest hits of decades past (“Kramer

Vs. Kramer,” “A Passage to India,” “L.A. Confidential,” “Last of the Mohicans” and so on).

Amazon says that it has 5,189 movies available for free Prime streaming, and about 20,000 TV episodes. The TV catalog includes “The West Wing” (an exclusive), lots of PBS shows and, coming soon, NBC series that Netflix already has, like “Parks & Recreation,” “Parenthood,” “Friday Night Lights,” “Heroes” and “Battlestar Galactica.” There are 48,000 or so other movies on the service, but they cost a few dollars to watch.

WHERE TO WATCH Both services let you watch on your Mac or PC, Roku box, Xbox, PlayStation 3, Nintendo 3DS or tablet (iPad or Kindle Fire). (You generally have to install the proper player software first.)

You can watch on your actual TV, too, if you have the right set-top box, Blu-ray player or TV set from Samsung, Sony, or LG. Still, Netflix wins here; it’s also available on TiVo, Apple TV, iPhone, Nintendo Wii, Android phones and tablets, Nook color e-book readers, the Boxee box, Windows Phones and more Blu-ray players and TV sets — 900 models in all, says the company. Yes, that’s right: you live in an age where you can watch real movies on your cellphone. Watch for low-flying hovercraft.

WHAT WATCHING IS LIKE Even with your face mashed against two screens playing side-by-side, it’s hard to declare one of these services a picture-quality winner. Both remember your place in a movie if you resume watching it on another gadget.

More than 80 percent of Netflix movies now offer subtitles; none of Amazon’s do. Those subtitles are a godsend if you’re having trouble hearing, you want to mute the TV, or you can’t understand Sylvester Stallone. And when you scroll a Netflix movie, scene thumbnails appear above your cursor so you know how far you’ve scanned; on Amazon, you have to guess.

Netflix’s Web site and recommendation technologies are far more evolved than Amazon’s, too. For example, the Amazon videos that cost extra often clutter your search results and get you all excited for nothing.

Netflix’s site bursts with suggestions for additional movies you might like, courtesy of its famous taste algorithms. Since it doesn’t have pay-to-view titles, it’s a lot easier to keep your bearings.

The bottom line: Netflix beats Prime on movie selection, site clarity and playback features. It has much more to watch, too; Netflix won’t say how many movies it has, but informed estimates put its catalog as twice the size of Amazon’s.

Both companies are spending hundreds of millions of dollars to snap up rights to more videos. (An imminent Amazon deal will bring thousands more movies to its catalog, I hear.)

That’s terrific. Still, for both services, for years to come, it will be safer to say “I’m sure I can find

something I like” than “I’m sure I can find that one movie.”

Amazon Prime costs less than Netflix; if you find value in the free shipping and Kindle downloads, it costs a lot less. And if you’ve come to accept that both of these services are more a potluck dinner than a complete menu, maybe the smaller catalog doesn’t matter.

Fortunately, there’s an easy way to find out how much the price/catalog size drawbacks bother you: sign up for a free month of each service. After all, there’s only one deal better than \$7 or \$8 a month for unlimited movie watching: unlimited movie watching for \$0.

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This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: August 29, 2012

An earlier version of this review incorrectly included the iPhone and the Wii among devices that work with both the Amazon and Netflix streaming services. Those two devices work only with Netflix’s service.