

# Media Aggregation: Friends of *Friends*

Annie Lausier  
Georgia Institute of Technology  
686 Cherry Street  
Atlanta, GA 30332-0165  
+1 919-418-5709

annielausier@gatech.edu

## ABSTRACT

This document describes a widget created to display upcoming *Friends* episodes (according to an individual's specific lineup) as well as filmographies of their guest stars.

## Keywords

Yahoo TV, Internet Movie Database (IMDB), XML, Switchboard

## 1. PROBLEM

The television series *Friends* first aired in 1994 and concluded a decade later [3]. Over 200 episodes were made. This fact, along with its success as a half-hour sitcom, has allowed *Friends* to grow successfully as a syndicated series that people can casually watch. The show airs multiple times a day on different stations. Because of the sheer number of episodes and the show's success, many notable actors made guest appearances on the show—but so did many less-famous actors. A viewer curious about a certain face they see on the show would have to wait until the credits to see the actor's name or go online and try to search for the episode he or she is watching and then search for that actor online to see what else he or she has been in. Additionally, a viewer who tunes in during the middle of a show may want to see what subplots her or she has missed.

## 2. EXISTING SOLUTIONS

### 2.1 Online Television Guides

There are many grid-based television guides that are particularly helpful in providing custom listings to users. TV Guide [6] has entertainment news and television listings. Yahoo! TV [7] also has customizable listings for specific cable providers. These websites also show a list of upcoming episodes of a specific series. Zap2it [8] is another television listing service that allows users to create customized XML listings specific to their needs (e.g. timeframes, stations). However, the XML creation tool relies on a single Zap2it account and lineup.

### 2.2 Episode Guides

*Friends* has many online resources that detail episode synopses and guest stars. For example, Friends TV [4] lists summaries and music for episodes. Wikipedia [3] also details episode information as well as a history of the show. Friends of XML [1] is a website created by Jörn Clausen that includes an XML version of every *Friends* episode and guest star. It is a handy data source but not a very user-friendly site.

### 2.3 Actor Listings

For the casual viewer, the most popular and credible source of information about actors and films is the Internet Movie Database [5]. It provides data about films, television shows, and their

actors. An actor's page on IMDB includes a headshot, filmography, roles, and personal information. It has guest star information of *Friends*, but it requires going to an individual episode's page.

## 3. DESIGN STRATEGY AND GOALS

The Friends of *Friends* widget is designed to bring listing, episode, and actor information data in one simple, compact place. It is a java applet that can be accessed online or from one's own computer. I wanted it to be customizable to users with different cable lineups, and Yahoo! TV uses simple PHP variables to specify them. It also lists future episodes of particular shows, as mentioned earlier. The Friends of XML site is a great source of episode and guest star data that is cleanly written in XML. And finally, IMDB is an extensive site of actor data. To bring them all together, I used Jeff Crouse's Switchboard library [2] in Processing because of its ability to parse both XML and HTML webpages. A user of Friends of *Friends* would start by entering his or her zip code and then his or her cable provider. Then the current or next *Friends* episode would appear with time and station information as well as a synopsis. In another window, guest stars appear. The user would then click on the actor's name to see a window of the actor's picture and filmography. The widget is designed to allow for information retrieval and exploration in a single location.

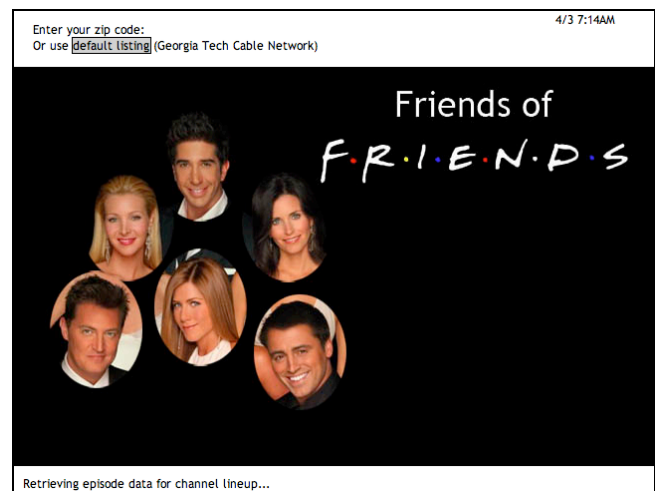


Figure 1. The opening screen of Friends of *Friends*.

## 4. IMPLEMENTATION

Friends of *Friends* was built in Processing because of its portability and utilizes Jeff Crouse's thesis project, the Switchboard library, because of its extensibility in parsing well-formed and HTML webpages. The widget utilizes threading to

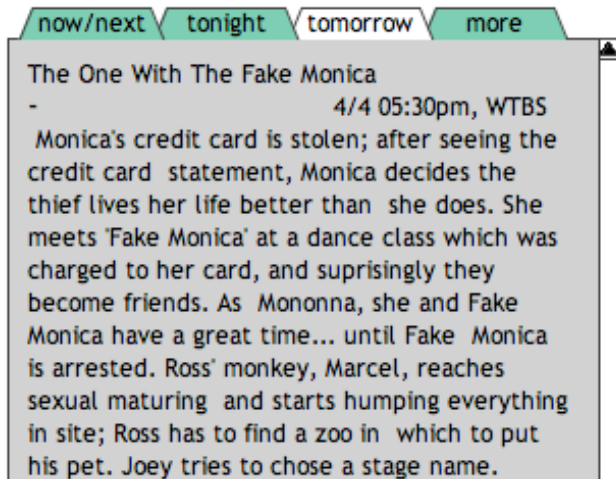


Figure 2. An episode listed in a window with a tabbed interface (ordered according to time).

perform multiple tasks at once. It begins by parsing the Friends of XML episode data while prompting a user for his or her zip code. The zip code is sent to Yahoo! TV's customization page and parsed for the specific providers, which are then shown. The user picks his or her appropriate provider, and this information is sent to Yahoo! TV's Friends Upcoming Episodes page. This page is parsed for episode titles, dates and times, and stations. The applet then displays these upcoming episodes, which are categorized by time. These time categories—"now/next", "tonight", "tomorrow", and "rest" are displayed as tabs that the user clicks to move from one to the other. The episode titles are expandable to show their synopses. One may expand the episode by clicking on the episode title or the plus sign below it. A window below the episode window shows secondary actors (guest stars) when the user expands the episode. Upon clicking the actor's name, a search is sent to IMDB for the actor and his or her page is parsed. In another window, the actor's name and image appear along with his or her acting history.

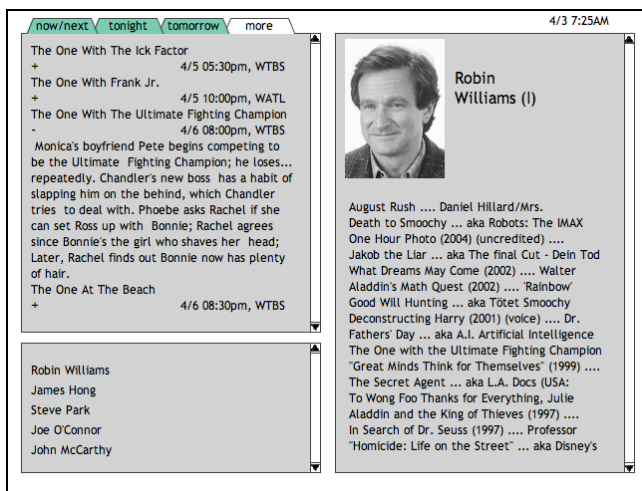


Figure 3. The Friends of Friends interface, including a list of episodes, guest stars, and actors.

## 5. PROPOSED EXTENSIONS

I would like to modify Friends of Friends to allow for increased functionality and use. Currently it does not have a search function, which I think would be valuable to allow for more perusal. I would also like to implement some sort of graphical timeline to show where in the series a particular episode lays. I would also like to include recently-aired episodes (possibly with Zap2it's XML services). I would also like to work on many formatting issues. The actor's IMDB box currently only displays one line per role, which I would like to amend. I want to add actor data (e.g. birthdate) next to the actor's headshot, as it is pretty bare with just the name. Also I would like to add the guest stars' roles in the bottom box for better identification.

## 6. EVALUATION

In my evaluation, I found the widget to be quick once its setup has completed, but very slow in setting up (due to parsing both the episode XML and Yahoo! TV listing HTML). I would like to look into optimization and/or other alternatives (source data, parsing, etc). Also, I would have had liked to focus more on the widget's graphical design (its creation was very coding-intensive).

## 7. FUTURE WORK

The Friends of Friends does what I set out for it to do. However, I see it as something that is very modular and plausible for other shows. With good episodic data, this could be done for other popular shows that are on television a lot (e.g. Seinfeld, Law & Order). In addition to my proposed extensions above, I would like to attempt standardizing the widget for other shows. This involves finding a good, clean source for episodes.

## 8. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wouldn't have been able to implement this widget so successfully without Jeff's Switchboard library. I thank him for his very well-documented library and the support on his website. Also, this project would not have been possible without Jörn Clausen's very well-formed episode data.

## 9. REFERENCES

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