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CONSUMER TECHNOLOGY

Games for the Couch Potato

What kind of interactive TV shows are likely to appear in the near future? Here's a glimpse of what you can expect.

By SARAH MCBRIDE

FOR ALL OF YOU who like to talk back to your TV set, here's some good news: Your TV will soon start listening.

After several years of hype, advanced interactive programming is on its way to becoming reality. While watching their favorite TV programs, audiences will be able to do things like play games tied to the show, answer quizzes and possibly even engage the characters they're watching.

There are still hurdles to be cleared. Advertisers need to be lined up and in some cases industry standards will need to be developed. But the technology is ready, and competition for viewers is expected to start pushing these kinds of programs onto the market as early as this year.

The possibilities were demonstrated this autumn, when groups of creative teams from various television companies worked with the Los Angeles-based American Film Institute to see just how creative they could get with interactive programming. Executives say the prototypes they came up with, which go far beyond anything available today, are the types of shows that will soon appear on television screens.

Music Videos

Viacom Inc.'s MTV Networks sent six people to the American Film Institute workshop to try to figure out how to get audiences more involved with the music videos they watch. The group hit upon marrying music videos with another Gen Y favorite: gaming.

"We've noticed there are certain points when the viewer would turn over the channel...[such as] when a music video comes on they don't like," says Dan Campbell, the interactive-television and creative manager for MTV in the U.K. and Ireland. "If they're engaged in a game, we would keep them longer."

In an MTV prototype show dubbed "Hijack," viewers use their remote controls to play games superimposed on music videos. For example, over the Gwen Stefani video "What You Waiting For," a cartoon head of Ms. Stefani bobs around a maze, controlled by the viewer's remote. If she misses one turn too many, the game ends.

"Scum!" flashes a message over the real Ms. Stefani, who is crooning to viewers while stuffed inside a dollhouse. "U Killed Gwen!" When the video is over, MTV can flash the names of the highest scorers on the screen.

During a Fatboy Slim video, "Wonderful Night," viewers can use the remote to choose graphics from a toolbar that appears at the bottom of the screen and superimpose them on the video. Throughout a Britney Spears video, "Toxic," an animated character in a red jumpsuit, Pixel Boi, can be called up at any time using the remote; viewers can select which dance moves he makes, ranging from breakdancing to moonwalking.

Viewers who aren't into games don't have to play or watch them; technophiles will have to opt into them by clicking their remote when they see the "Hijack" logo at the bottom of their screen.

"Hijack" should be available in some form in the U.K., where interactive programming already is established, early this year. If it draws enough of a following, it will be rolled out in additional European markets in the months ahead, and eventually in the U.S.

'Queer Eye' Calling

Cellphones also figure in the future of interactive TV. At the American Film Institute workshop, a team from General Electric Co.'s Bravo cable-TV network wanted to figure out how viewers of the hip makeover show "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy" could grab advice from the tube and store it on their mobile phones, where they could easily consult the tips while shopping.

"To be honest, going into the workshop, we weren't sure it could be done," says Sean Redlitz, Bravo's director of content and promotion. But working with a version of Sun Microsystems Inc.'s Java computer programming language designed for telephone games, the team figured out a way to make it happen.

Viewers can opt to receive phone messages during the show that will tell them when a tip is available for the taking; if they accept, by pressing buttons on the phone, the tip is zapped right into their phone. On the screen, the show looks the same as usual.

In the course of the episode the creative team worked with, the show's "Fab Five" lifestyle advisers teach a young man how to prepare salmon with blackberry sauce. In the interactive version, which hasn't aired, viewers can get a

phone message asking if they want to download the recipe onto their phone. Earlier in the show, when one of the show's hosts shops for salmon in the market, those viewers can also grab tips on how to pick really fresh fish.

"Having a cell-phone nearby when

you're watching television seems to be something America is prepared to do, judging by the success of voting [by cell-phone] on reality-TV shows," says Mr. Redlitz. And he thinks "Queer Eye" has enough loyal viewers who would be prepared to download onto their phones the software needed to receive the messages.

The idea already has one group of important backers: advertisers. "Advertisers are asking us to come to them with these kind of ideas," says Stephen Andrade, vice president for interactive development at General Electric's NBC network. "It's a little bit of chicken or egg, because they want us to build it [first], and we want them to commit to advertising."

The prototype "Queer Eye" show demonstrates the potential appeal to advertisers. Viewers who like some featured cushions from Williams-Sonoma Inc.'s West Elm chain, for instance, are able to download information about the stores. Later, as these viewers drive around town, they can pull up the information to find nearby locations and store hours.

While there are no immediate plans to launch an interactive version of "Queer Eye," Mr. Andrade says he's showing the prototype to various executives with a view to launching something similar in the future. "We'd love to do something [interactive] with 'Queer Eye,'" he says. "It's there, ready to go."

Expanding 'The L Word'

Dramas and sitcoms won't work for interactive television, goes the conven-

Cellphones may also figure in the future of interactive TV

tional wisdom, because viewers don't want to interrupt the flow of dialogue to engage with the show. But producers at Viacom's Showtime cable network decided that if the pauses were quick and compelling enough, viewers wouldn't mind.

Their prototype created at the workshop is designed to work with cable television, using a digital video recorder like the one sold by TiVo Inc. It also requires the industry's adoption of a standard interactive-cable platform, which is about 18 months away, estimates Mark Greenberg, executive vice president for strategy at Showtime Networks.

The Showtime producers came up with a magazine-type quiz that viewers could opt into during "The L Word," a show about a group of lesbian and bisexual women living in Los Angeles. Viewers who take part can interrupt the programming briefly during various scenes to say how they would handle a situation. For example, when one character finds out his date is bisexual, interactive viewers can choose from responses ranging from "Too heavy for me" to "I'll stay, if I'm the only one."

At the end, viewers are matched up with the characters they are most like. "Girlfriend, you and I think the same

way," musician Kit, played by Pam Grier, tells her soulmates in the audience, and chats about some personality traits they share.

Viewers also can click on the interactive icon at the corner of the screen to get more background on various scenes. But instead of the ho-hum director or actor commentary that typically comes with DVDs, they get insight from an actor or actress remaining in character; in this prototype, a rich socialite spends a couple of minutes explaining why she dumped a hairdresser. That way, even when they pause the show, viewers remain "firmly rooted in the fictional world of the series," explains Mr. Greenberg.

Naysayers believe that anyone who wants more involvement with dramas and sitcoms will head to their computers for the games and quizzes already offered on show Web sites. But Mr. Greenberg says putting extra bells and whistles right on the TV screen will draw in viewers who wouldn't necessarily check the Web site.

Kid Stuff

In some ways, kids are the ideal candidates for interactive TV. They adopt tech-



TALKING BACK A prototype interactive episode of the series "The L Word"

nology faster than adults, and they're already used to interacting with shows—for example, singing along or answering questions out loud.

Walt Disney Co.'s interactive version of "Kim Possible," a show about a busy high-school teen, will allow viewers to hunt for hidden on-screen trading cards. They can use their remote controls to "grab" them, and then trade them with other kids. The feature, which will work only for households that subscribe to the Disney Channel on Demand, will be available later this year.

In the American Film Industry workshop's prototype for an interactive version of "Dora the Explorer," a popular preschool show on Viacom's Nickelodeon cable network, kids participate in a scav-

enger hunt. A bar along the bottom of the screen shows the items they're looking for, like a hat. In the scenes where the items appear, the kids can click on them with their remotes.

"The reward is just momentary: 'Aha! I got it!'" says Marcia Zellers, director of enhanced television at the American Film Institute. But for such young kids, she says, that's reward enough.

Although it has no plans to immediately launch an interactive version of "Dora," Nickelodeon did test the prototype late last year with a group of young kids. Don't think the preschoolers had any trouble getting into it: Working the remote "was so much more intuitive to them than it was to some of their parents," says Ms. Zellers. ■