

## **Interactivists In Search of the Holy Grail Return to the AFI**

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*This Wednesday, July 24<sup>th</sup>, several hundred television producers and digital production professionals will assemble on the campus of the American Film Institute in Hollywood to launch the fifth annual AFI Enhanced Television Workshop. Sponsored again this year by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, along with Microsoft TV & Digital Media Division, Liberate Technologies, Open TV, AT&T Digital Media Labs, and Interland Corp., the event kicks off a six-month production cycle for eight teams of producers from public and commercial TV.*

*CURRENT asked Nick DeMartino, the AFI executive who launched the workshop, for a personal perspective on the interactive television field and the people in it.*

**By Nick DeMartino**

What comes to mind when I say “interactive television”? I’ll bet your answer depends largely upon whether you’ve ever actually watched any.

Over the years, many systems have been employed to allow “interactivity” to become part of the TV viewing process. Along the way, a cadre of devoted professionals has emerged as “interactivists” --- true believers who have devoted their careers to fostering this new medium.

They’ve produced for Qube, Tele-TV, Warner’s Full Service Network, CD-I, CD-ROM, broadband cable, thin clients, thick clients, one screen or two-screen... whatever the technology, their quest has been to give birth to a new medium.

The designers, producers, technologists, consultants and assorted innovators who are coming to the AFI this week want to make sure you get to watch interactive TV.

Why are they so devoted, often in the face of indifference or daunting challenges? I put this question to many of these interactivists --- both mentors and participants in past AFI workshops. Their optimism is infectious, and explains why the AFI has persisted in its mission to find a voice for the creative community as technology changes the way we watch -- and produce --- television.

### **Getting Personal**

For many interactivists, it was their own first experience with interactive media that made them true believers... call it their *personal interactive epiphany*.

Consultant and journalist Gary Arlen, recalls his: "My light bulb moment came about 20 years ago when I first encountered QUBE and the early cable and online and videodisc products (from the Sears videodisc catalog to play-along games)."

"I recognized that these represented new kinds of experiences there were built upon existing activities that people liked to do," says Arlen.

"The frustration has always been the complexity and expense of the technology -- and in recent years, finding a commercial business model. The excitement is that interactive media reverts to old campfire storytelling methods, in which individuals can listen or see the tale in their own personal way... amplifying, embellishing, enhancing the message in the process. Interactive means you can see (do) something more

than I tell you to see... It becomes YOUR vision too."

Craig Ullman, creative director at ACTV, dates his conversion to the first time he played a video game. "It was a bar in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, in 1981. The game part of the game wasn't of great interest, but the idea that I could actually affect what was happening on screen in real time was an enormous jolt, viscerally seductive.... Ultimately, despite all the market manipulations, pundit panic and consumer confusion, interactive media is quietly becoming the dominant communications and entertainment form of the twenty-first century. As for me, I always prefer to be on the side of the inevitable."

Rick Mandler, who runs ABC's Enhanced TV, describes his own "aha" moment. "For me, it was during a Sunday Night Football game. There was a disputed play on the field, and one of the teams called for a replay challenge. The broadcast producers had the talent encourage folks to vote on whether the play should be upheld or not, and put up graphics showing the votes coming in live. Several of the angles showed that the play should stand, and the votes reflected that. Then... they found an angle which showed clearly that the play should be overruled. The votes immediately shifted the other way as soon as that angle was shown, and within seconds after, the referee on the field overruled the play.

"It took what would have been a slow moment in the broadcast, and made it

interesting, and participatory. Or to put it a little differently, the interactivity, made television better.”

### **A new medium is forming**

“The excitement of the current moment in designing for interactive TV is similar to the thrill of seeing the movies take form in the early 1900’s or television in the 1950’s or the Internet in the early 1990’s,” says Dr. Janet Murray, who heads the program in information design at Georgia Tech, and serves as both an AFI Trustee and a mentor in the AFI ETV program.

Murray continues: “The technical work is almost there, and the content community is small now, but very experienced and savvy. A new medium is forming, but still just out of reach. The most exciting possibility lies in new storytelling formats that are being invented, new ways of involving the viewer/interactor, new ways of allowing us to imagine the many possibilities of life, new ways of expressing who we are and what we mean to one another.”

“We’re at a nexus point,” says Suzanne Stefanac, a longtime AFI mentor whose most recent iTV company was Respond TV. “Just as television grew from novelty to ubiquity in a few short years, interactive television is sneaking in the back door and threatening to throttle us. We can either cower and wither or we can meet this challenge head on, learning to tame and shape our expectations and our interactions. “

“Television professionals have had more than 50 years to hone their talents,” notes Stefanac. “We have a fraction of that time to adapt to this new two-way world in which the power of the Nielsens pales in the face of a real-time chat board. The more quickly we allow ourselves to strip away our prior assumptions and looking brutally at the new truths, the more likely we are to survive and even thrive. I personally find this obsessively compelling.”

“Like most new technologies, skills and art forms, interactive TV is very much driven by the human desire to innovate and to become better ... as well, of course, to reap the commercial rewards for creating something new and successful,” says Jasper Smith, CEO of Static 2358, a production firm owned by Open TV. “I’d liken what we’re doing with interactive to the advent of color TV back in the 60’s – an improvement to what already exists and not a complete revolution that rips up the expectations and standards viewers are comfortable with. What drives us most are the aspiration to connect with our audiences.”

Consultant Brian Seth Hurst, who chaired the committee that just awarded an Emmy for interactive television for the first time ever, sees great progress in the work over the past years: “A few years back we received a technology toolbox and some raw materials. There were no blueprints, and nobody really knew what to build ---- or even how to finance the building of it. It was exciting, as people experimented.”

“Now, we Emmy judges saw some really wonderful work. I can see the medium maturing.... finding its way with more logical, compelling, well-designed and integrated experiences. I am particularly encouraged by the next generation of creators raised on the Internet, and interactively entertained by console gaming. Their contribution is but a few years away. ... I think the most exciting part for me is the opportunity to participate in the invention of the future. Even with the ups and downs it's a great ride.”

### **The Holy Grail: Making TV new**

“Why am I still in this?” asks Curtis Wong, Manager of Microsoft Research's Next Media Group, and a veteran interactivist whose vision is focused on the user experience, regardless of the technology employed.

“I guess I'm looking for the Holy Grail,” he says.

That means “a rich narrative, coupled with context and information sources,” according to Wong. “Our goal is always integration between television and interactivity. The top layer is television. Then there is the context layer, which emphasizes the importance of the story. Finally, there is the reference layer, which gives the user a lot more depth.” Wong was part of a team that created an interactive TV version of WGBH's “Commanding Heights” on the web earlier this year. Viewers can watch a streaming video version of the show, chapterized and annotated.

For Liberate Technologies Creative Director, Blair Beebe, who has mentored at the AFI from the beginning, the greatest reward in producing iTV is the response of the viewer. “There's usually a look of surprise, sometimes a smile. The viewer now has a new way to experience the television program. Our job is to make the experience fun, uncomplicated, interesting and better than before. ... When we develop something new, we make our customers and TV viewers smile.”

London-based consultant Ferhan Cook believes that iTV is especially important for creating community. “People like to be connected to one another through commonality of ideas or feelings. They like to feel part of a community. TV programs can be the best community builder, even more so than internet. TV programs create emotional attachment, audience identification with a cause whether it is a common ideology, feeling or whatever. Interactive and enhanced TV coupled with communication technologies have the power to turn TV into a most powerful community builder.” Cook believes that features like chat, voting, text messaging, and the like will be very appealing in the US as systems here catch up to the robust iTV marketplace of the U.K. and continental Europe.

“Enhanced television enables a linear program to become a "portal" of related information,” explains AFI mentor Bob Kaminsky of Comedia. “When we did the prototype for "the History of Irish Rock", for the AFI workshop, it was a delight to watch the program, while also having the ability to hear an

interview with Bob Geldoff, watch an Alan Parker Movie (The Commitments), read excerpts of Shamus Haney's poems, buy "Ray Charles Live at Newport" when Van Morrison says during his interview that it was a key influence, and finally to watch U2 Live at Redrocks." That is the world of Irish popular culture."

"ITV "clicked" for me during the AFI workshop," notes Brenna Hajek, a writer and producer who started as a mentor three years ago while with the consulting firm MarchFirst. "I was struck by Janet Murray's assertion that certain stories are struggling within the boundaries of their current media that would be better served if told using the interactivity of ITV... for instance, alternate points of view."

This revelation led her mentor team to experiment with ways of depicting alternate points of view for PBS' "The Roman Empire" prototype, a PBS show in the workshop several years ago.

Continued Hajek: "When I saw the demo for PBS' "The New Americans" at the AFI workshop last year, my eyes were opened to a whole new way of teaching English as a Second Language. The application allows users to choose subtitles or narration in a different language from the broadcast, and my friends who teach ESL couldn't believe how cool that was."

New York based indie producer Daniel Anker created an interactive version of his documentary about Philadelphia Orchestra musicians, "Music from the Inside Out," at AFI two years ago. "As an independent producer, to have to consider interactivity

and technology on top of everything else, begs the question "why?" Why bother? For me the answer is first of all that not everything should be made interactive. But if you do pursue it, and you continually ask yourself the "why's", you may find that new technology enhances your content, and enhances your vision in ways you didn't expect."

"There is something about interactivity that brings out the collaboration in people," observes Louis Barbash, CPB production executive who has managed the AFI relationship for five years.

"People in this interactive field seem delighted to share, to talk about ideas, and to support each other," says Barbash, who manages a grants program at CPB that supports a wide range of interactive production. "There's also a feeling about being on the frontier that makes us want to work together. Maybe it's because there's not yet a solid business model for interactive TV, but the focus is not on competition, but rather on making the program work. In that regard, nobody can do it alone. It takes the producer, the technologists, the business people, the designers...all working together."

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