Types of Interactive television

The term “interactive television” is used to refer to a variety of rather different kinds of interactivity (both as to usage and as to technology). It is sometime called interactive TV, ITV, or idTV. It describes any number of efforts to allow viewers to interact with television content as they view.

Interactive with a TV Set

The simplest, interactivity with a TV set is the one that is already very successful. This got its first big jump with the use of the remote control to enable channel surfing behaviors, and has evolved to include video-on-demand, VCR-like pause, rewind, and fast forward, and DVRs, commercial skipping and the like. It does not change any content or its inherent linearity, only how we control the viewing of that content (DVRs allow users to time shift content in a way that most VCR owners never learned to do. This is a kind of interactive TV, and not insignificant, but it is not what is meant in any full sense of the term. It is already taking place in many homes.) Calling the simple use of a remote control to turn TV sets on and off as an example of interactivity is like saying turning the pages of a book makes the book interactive.

Interactive with TV program content

Interactive with TV program content is the one that is “interactive TV”, but it is also the most challenging to produce. This is the idea that the program, itself, might change based on viewer input. Advanced forms, which still have uncertain prospect for becoming mainstream, include dramas where viewers get to choose plot details and endings. Simpler forms, which are enjoying some success, include programs that directly incorporate polls, questions, comments, and other forms of (virtual) audience response back into the show. There is much debate as to how effective and popular this kind of truly interactive TV can be. It seems likely that some forms of it will be popular, but that viewing of pre-defined content, with a scripted narrative arc, will remain a major part of the TV experience indefinitely.

Interactive with content that is related to what is on TV - "tcommerce"

The least understood, interactivity with TV related content may have most promise to radically alter how we watch TV over the next decade. Examples include getting more information about what is on the TV, whether sports, movies, news, or the like. Similar (and most likely to pay the bills), is getting more information about what is being advertised, along with the ability to buy it - this is called “tcommerce” (short for “television commerce”). Partial steps in this direction are already becoming a mass phenomenon, as Web sites and mobile phone services coordinate with TV programs. This kind of multitasking is already happening on large scale – but there is currently little or no automated support for relating that secondary interaction to what is on the TV compared to other forms of interactive TV.

Others argue that this is more a matter of “web-enhanced” television viewing rather than calling it interactive TV.

In the coming months and years, there will be no need to have both a computer and a TV set for interactive television as the interactive content will be built into the system via the next generation of set-top boxes.

“Synchronized TV” or “Two-Screen” Interactive TV

Many think of interactive TV primarily in terms of “one-screen” forms that involve interaction on the TV screen, using the remote control. But there is another significant form of interactive TV that makes use of “two screens”. In this case, the second screen may be a PC that is connected to a web site application that is synchronized with the TV broadcast, but other two-screen forms can involve interaction with mobile phone applications that run “in synch” with the show or applications on PDAs. Such services are sometimes called “Enhanced TV” by certain companies, but this term is not being used widely anymore as it is seen as anachronistic and is often still misused occasionally.

Today, two-screen interactive TV is called either 2-screen (for short) or “Synchronized TV” and is widely deployed around the US by national broadcasters with the help of technology offerings from certain companies. One-screen interactive TV generally requires special support in the set-top box, but two-screen synchronized ITV applications generally do not, relying instead on internet or mobile phone servers to coordinate with the TV.