

November 19, 2006

TELEVISION

Your TV Would Like a Word With You

By [LORNE MANLY](#)

WHEN Gail Smith left for Guam in the late 1980s, to pursue a job as a computer teacher, the television-viewing experience she left behind in Florence, S.C., had barely budged since the medium's beginnings. Save for the introduction of the remote and the VCR, the routine was essentially the same: turn on the set, pop down in the comfy chair and veg out.

Upon Ms. Smith's return to the mainland 15 years later, the changes surrounding the once-dumb television set astounded her. "I feel like TV is sooooo different," she said recently. "It's not like I'm sitting there being the couch potato."

Like lots of other Americans, she rents a digital video recorder, which allows her to time-shift her favorite shows, and she can choose from hundreds of movies on demand. But in other regards Ms. Smith is ahead of the curve.

She is one of 160,000 Time Warner subscribers who, as part of a broad experiment, are living with what may well be the future of television: souped-up interactivity. As a result she gets to choose not just when she wants to watch certain programs, but to a greater or lesser extent what those programs look like on her screen — what news to magnify and what personalized information to call up, where to go deep and what to skip.

If she's watching CNN or CNBC, she can select short video clips on the latest headlines or market news, just as she might while clicking her way around a Web site. When she can't sleep, she can turn to the Weather Channel, click on an icon and dip into one of the network's "Storm Stories," the popular compendium of meteorological havoc.

This taste of control has left her wanting more. "I would like to do more fine-tuning," said Ms. Smith, 55, who now works as a graphic designer. "And I think that day will come soon."

She's not alone. Grandiose promises of an interactive future circulated for decades, then seemingly died out a few years back. But today more than 25 million homes can engage with their television on something approaching their own terms. The omniscient television programmer symbolized by the opening of "The Outer Limits" — "For the next hour, sit quietly and we will control all that you see and hear" — has been humbled.

Hard-core football fans with DirecTV can arrange for instant alerts about their favorite players. Dish

Network subscribers in 12 states can wager on horse races without hauling themselves from their La-Z-Boys. And some Time Warner subscribers can vote for their favorite reality television contestant by simply pressing a button.

In the coming months, ESPN iZone will allow Dish Network subscribers to get sports news when they want, rather than waiting until “Sports Center” gets around to them. And the Disney Channel Game Zone will offer kids arcade and character-driven games.

Still, there are plenty of hurdles to clear before these new offerings become the norm. Some are technological. Some are habitual: for example, can multitasking viewers handle yet another task? And there’s the question of whether customers even want these newfangled options. Television may never have been just a boob tube, but it’s unclear just how smart people really want it to be.

IN its very crudest form, a kind of paleo-interactivity has been around since television’s early years. Fans of “Winky Dink and You,” a 1950s children’s show, could send away for a kit that included special crayons and a piece of vinyl plastic. When Winky found himself in a spot of trouble, kids were told to stick the “magic drawing screen” on the television and draw Winky’s salvation. Many just scribbled on the screen.

New York area children of the 1970s may remember WPIX’s call-in contests: lucky viewers got a call inviting them to play a video game on the air, by screaming “PIX!” into the phone every time they wanted to fire a pixelated missile. On the other end of the line a hapless station employee would carry out the command.

Eventually the quest for interactivity got more sophisticated. QUBE, rolled out in Columbus, Ohio, in 1977, allowed viewers to order movies, cast mock votes on city council proposals, even bid in community auctions. In 1994 Time Warner’s Full Service Network arrived in Orlando, Fla., amid dazzling visions of movies on demand, video shopping and cool games.

But these later versions didn’t have much more impact than their crude forebears. And other prospectors — like Wink, WebTV, AOLTV and Tele-TV — came up empty-handed too.

As a result, consumers have grown justifiably wary of the promise that someday they and their televisions will speak to each other. But cultural theorists have grown just as skeptical of the notion that TV was ever a one-way conversation. Marshall McLuhan was among the first to question that model: “TV will not work as background,” he wrote in “Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man.” “It engages you. You have to be with it.”

Television viewing comes in many forms, said Susan Murray, a professor of culture and communication at [New York University](#) and the author of “Hitch Your Antenna to the Stars: Early Television and Broadcast Stardom.”

“We might be a ‘couch potato’ at times, which might involve watching television in such a way that lets us zone out, or we use it as background noise or company,” she said. “At other times we might become more

actively engaged with a program as we pay close attention in order to work to figure out its cultural references, the nuances of its plot and character development, the way in which it might be in conversation with other programs, or the history or details of its production.”

Today’s more intricate shows, like “The Sopranos” or “Lost,” practically demand engaged, active viewing. “There’s a tolerance for complexity and paying attention that’s been bred in the audience,” said Steven Johnson, the author of “Everything Bad Is Good for You: How Today’s Popular Culture Is Actually Making Us Smarter.”

This “sleeper curve,” as Mr. Johnson refers to it in his book, began 25 years ago with “Hill Street Blues,” slowly training people to be more observant television watchers and follow more characters and plot lines.

Digital video recorders and DVD players have been a boon to those kinds of shows, which reward multiple viewings. Meanwhile audiences have gotten used to the participatory dynamic of the Web, where they can gratify almost any factual or visual craving, debate dramatic plot twists or craft “fan fiction” futures for their favorite characters.

“I think these largely marginal fan fiction obsessive sites are certainly destined to become more mainstream in the coming years, and that will make it increasingly essential for television shows to foster some kind of interactivity,” Mr. Johnson said. “Those fan sites are like the Dungeons and Dragons or dice baseball players 30 years ago. They looked like they were destined to be a sub-subculture, but in fact what they were doing eventually became the videogame industry, which is the dominant form of entertainment for 10- to 25-year-old boys now.

“You have this expectation of engagement that a whole generation is coming to television with.”

The new technological innovations might relocate some of those activities from the computer screen to the television screen. Some viewers of GSN game shows like “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire” who now play along through their computers will soon be able to do so through their remotes instead.

The new purveyors of interactive television insist they have learned from earlier missteps and have a better sense of exactly what people want to interact with.

For [John Kelly](#), a computer technician for Adelphia high-speed cable in Wichita, Kan., that would be football. On top of the \$249 he pays DirecTV for a season of its Sunday Ticket cavalcade of games, he ponies up another \$99 for its Super Fan option. Now he can watch eight games at a time, all arrayed on his 54-inch television set, a trick that comes in handy when he and his brother watch football together. Mr. Kelly, 38, roots for the Green Bay Packers; his brother, Jackie, cheers on the Dallas Cowboys. And there’s no need to keep flipping channels.

Mr. Kelly can also customize the Sunday Ticket football package, to get immediate notices about the exploits of his favorite players and teams. Two Sundays ago, when a nurse friend had to work at the same time her beloved Tennessee Titans took the field, Mr. Kelly punched in some of their names. Whenever

those Titans did something noteworthy on the field, an advisory would pop up on his television screen, and he'd fire off a text message to her.

"I would never have dreamed 20 years ago that I'd be able to do this on a TV in my lifetime," added Mr. Kelly, who grew up in Maud, Okla., with a set that got only CBS. Now he doesn't even like watching games at bars or at friends' houses. Without his newfound powers, he says, "it feels like I have a hand cut off."

This sort of passion explains why so many of these new bells and whistles involve sports. This summer, DirecTV subscribers could watch up to five live U.S. Open matches on the USA Network — at once. Dish Network subscribers could watch the Indianapolis 500 on six different camera feeds or zoom in on one of them. (More than half a million people gave it a try.) This past baseball season DirecTV viewers of the YES Network could pick the camera angle from which they wanted to watch the Yankees.

And why stop at real sports?

On a recent Sunday, as they do most weeks during the season, Eric Putnam and Adam Johnson settled in front of their 52-inch Toshiba rear-projection, high-definition television in an Upper West Side brownstone, to gorge on a day (and night) of football with beers in their hands (Budweiser for Mr. Putnam, Yuengling for Mr. Johnson).

While they have their sentimental favorites, their allegiances also extend to the men they've assembled for their fantasy squads. And that helps explain why they have laptops open in front of them: instantly to track how their fantasy teams are doing. Mr. Putnam, who competes with his fellow workers on the UBS Securities foreign exchange desk in Stamford, Conn., also often flits into his bedroom. There, his 25-inch Sharp Acquos [LCD](#) television has the player-tracker feature, which his big television doesn't. Loaded with the names of some of the real players he and Mr. Johnson, who runs operations for the New York office of the Bonhams auction house, have drafted, it gives him updates of his players' stats even faster than his computer does.

The experience has left these two virtual general managers wanting even more. "The interactive features, they're nice to have, but that's not the main reason I'm turning on the TV," Mr. Putnam said. "Right now it's more of a side dish. But I could see that changing down the road."

Giving fantasy owners the ability to manage their teams right on the TV set, which some Time Warner Cable subscribers can already do, could make interactivity more central to the viewing experience. "This is the way you're going to watch — and care about — football," Mr. Putnam said.

Steve Koonin, president of Turner Entertainment Networks (which owns TBS, TNT, Court TV and Turner Classic Movies), said such "interactivity with consequences" provides a smart guiding philosophy for future developments. And it works just as well if viewers want to win a sports bet, place a vote or get specialized information.

On Bravo earlier this year, a third of "Top Chef" viewers in selected Time Warner markets registered their

opinions on questions like “Which of these three contestants should go home right now?” The appeal: “Being in control of having their voice heard,” said Lauren Zalaznick, president of Bravo.

Randall Neighbour, a Dish Network subscriber in Houston, runs Touch Outreach Ministries, which helps churches set up small groups for activities like prayer and discussion. Because he travels a lot, he is partial to the weather offerings. Punching in a ZIP code, he can quickly learn the current conditions, get his fill of Doppler radar and check the five-day forecast for whatever locale he chooses. It’s a far cry from the offerings on the six channels Mr. Neighbour, 44, grew up with. If he timed it right, he got home from school in time for “Gilligan’s Island” and “I Love Lucy” repeats. But more often the good shows were on when he couldn’t watch them.

The arrival of the digital video recorder, and now interactive television, has made him “much more of a TV junkie than I’d like to be,” Mr. Neighbour said.

“I love my [DVR](#),” he added with a laugh. “I’d marry it and have its children if I wasn’t already married.” Luckily the digital video recorder does not appear to be jealous of Mr. Neighbour’s wife. The couple will often get up early on Friday morning to watch “Grey’s Anatomy” at 6:30, lounging in bed with mugs of coffee.

Lately some dramas have begun experimenting with tiny doses of interactivity. The N’s “Degrassi: The Next Generation” invited viewers to weigh in on pressing topics like “Who looks hotter in a white tank top?”

But those kinds of add-ons can be a distraction from an absorbing story. Ms. Smith, the graphic designer in Florence, S.C., is a fan of shows like “Gilmore Girls” and “Grey’s Anatomy.” As much as she loves her television’s new interactive elements, she says she has no desire to, say, vote on future plot developments. “I want to see what the writers are going to do,” she said. “I like the surprise.”

And that, ultimately, may be the problem all these advances face, if interactive television is ever going to expand from its modest selection of sports, weather and reality shows, as well as advertising and home shopping. Some of the perceived limitations of TV — that it unfolds according to its own schedule, that writers and actors have more control than viewers do — are actually kind of fun. It’s exciting to imagine a day when viewers can decide how a series should end, but it may be more enjoyable to relax and let the experts decide.

It’s also not clear that anyone is willing to put aside the myriad distractions that have become such a deep part of the viewing experience. And all the maneuvering by the satellite and cable operators could be for naught if people continue to think of computers, not TV sets, as the place to interact with programming.

“Computers and the Net were designed from the ground up to be interactive,” said Mr. Johnson, the author. “I have to think that they will always offer more elaborate forms of interactivity than something the cable companies might stitch together.

“Ultimately are you trying to trick out the TV too much to do something that it isn’t really meant to do?”

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