



Pick your camera angle, find out about players and teams and miss the goal with Sky Sports Interactive

Two-way stretch

Your viewers will soon be glued to the box - but they won't be watching any programmes. Rob Buckley wonders how interactive television is going to come up with any content beyond games and banking



Interactive gameshows will be the most ubiquitous interactive format

Spotting The Next Big Thing is tricky. Before the internet took off, it was mainly just a pile of scientific papers and some illegal software that nobody of any importance knew or cared about; now, it's the Thing That Will Change Life As We Know It. Currently, a lot of companies are spending a lot of money in the hope that interactive television will be the next next big thing. But it could be the next Betamax.

At its simplest, it's a button on your remote control marked 'i' that you can press to get more information about the programme or ad. At its most visionary, it's access to just about everything electronic through the television. Viewers will surf the web, go shopping, read magazines, play games, send e-mail, and watch whatever programmes they want, whenever they want. They can even get their TV to work out what they want to watch, let it record the programmes for them, then play them back when they want with their own graphics, to create a personal TV channel.

So far, so theoretical. Is all this actually going to happen? In all likelihood, not in the next five years unless something major changes. So what's holding it up? Money, content and disagreement, as per usual.

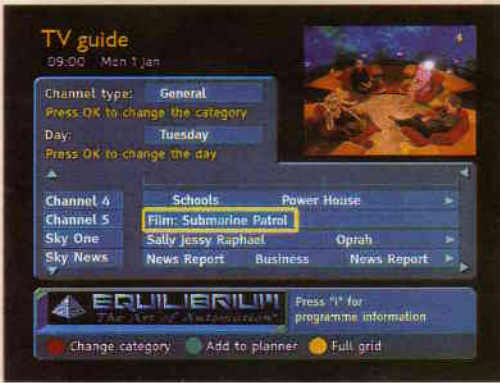
It's not a desire to create a better experience for the viewer but cash which is the driving force for interactive TV. Unless you're the government or a public service broadcaster with the argument for the licence fee to maintain, you're going to need a good business case for putting any interactive con-

tent on any of the services - all three platforms (see box overleaf) demand that anyone putting interactive content on to their services pay a carrier fee and possibly a share of the revenues they might gain from the service.

For home banking and home shopping, it's easy to make a case for putting up an interactive site. Tesco and Sainsbury's, for example, have put their interactive sites on Open and Cable & Wireless's platforms respectively. Viewers can search for items they want to buy, place an order using the service and have it delivered, all without leaving their front room. And in the cut-throat banking world, the chain that gives the customers the most services gets the most customers. Both HSBC (one of the partners in Open) and Barclays are going to be offering TV banking: viewers can check statements, transfer money between accounts and even pay bills using the service.

For gameshows on the commercial channels, it's equally simple. David Hughes, head of marketing at Two Way TV (which will be providing games channels for Cable & Wireless and potentially the other platforms), says those shows with an interactive game accompanying them found their ratings nearly doubled in an interactive trial two years ago. The trial included content based around established favourites of analogue television, like *Wheel of Fortune*, *University Challenge*, *Family Fortunes* and *Fifteen to One*.

Sport, of course, already has Sky's much-hyped ►



Electronic programme guides are the simplest example of interactivity: viewers can search schedules by keyword or genre to find programmes they want on any channel

football interactivity (where viewers can select the camera angles of the coverage), but On Digital's Andrew Marre looks down on this early foray into the field; "It's debatable whether you can call that truly interactive. I think viewers want someone who's there to provide the camera angles - with my luck, I'd be searching for the right angle when the goal was scored." Marre also points out that this degree of interactivity would take up a whole On Digital multiplex - capacity the company can't afford to give up.

But for drama, documentaries, soaps and the like, the question isn't just "how can we make money from interactivity?" it's also "what interactive content can we actually provide that will make money?"

Martin Graham-Scott, head of business communications at Cable & Wireless, admits that he can't see why producers of dramas and documentaries would want to add interactive content to their programmes anyway; it'll be the broadcasters who oblige producers to create the extras. Perhaps that's why, in all the services now starting (Open, Telewest, Cable & Wireless and Kingston Interactive are starting to roll out their services, with NTL and On Digital launching theirs next year), there's next to no programme-oriented interactivity yet. The BBC's main stab at interactive so far is a few hyperlinks for WebTV viewers within programmes; and a few recipes on CFN really don't amount to a hill of beans in the interactive world.

Chris Sheffield is md of Eunite, a start-up that not only consults on interactive projects but designs them as well. His suggestion to broadcasters is to get sponsors for interactive sites and to take a commission on products sold during ad breaks through the interactive service. "Ads on websites and interactive sites also have far longer life-spans than a 30-second ad."

Nevertheless, interactive content is being sought out using both carrot and stick. NTL ceo Barclay Knapp wants producers to help him produce "enteractivity." If they don't, they will soon lose their audiences to internet companies, he

believes. And ITV's Network Centre is making it clear that programme pitches that include an interactive element will receive preferential treatment. In all likelihood, it will be the broadcasters that arrange interactive content for their programming, rather than producers, since only economy of scale will make it viable.

Games are likely to be the most popular form of interactivity. On Digital already has a games channel, and Marre is keen to promote games and e-mail over anything else interactivity has to offer (perhaps because of the bandwidth required by anything else - something On Digital doesn't have).

Mark Rock of Static, a design company that's focussing on interactive TV, explains. "It costs a lot

to set up a good interactive site - one or two million. Before anyone does that, they're going to want to dip their toe in the water first." Games are easy to repackage, can work even on the reduced computing capacity of set-top boxes, and are cheap to create. And players of games spend a long time looking at the screen and any banner advertising that goes on them. You can even lure players to try games with the promise of e-commerce vouchers (similar to air miles) if they play for long enough.

Commercials have the potential to change the most through interactivity. A 30-second commercial could have an accompanying 30-second game for the viewer to play concurrently. But it doesn't stop there. Rock points out the problems: "Consider

THE PLATFORMS In a perfect world, interactive platforms would be identical. In the television world there are three completely different ones: Sky Digital, On Digital and cable, with the third split by operator into different sub-platforms. Sky Digital and On Digital send their signals to the set-top box via dish or aerial. When viewers want to communicate back with an e-commerce transaction, for example, the set-top box uses their phone lines for the purpose. So they are limited both by the transmission speed of data down a phone line, and the extra phone bill they will face if they go interactive. Cable, on the other hand, uses fibre optics to transmit and receive data (so no extra phone bill), which means that far more information can be transmitted and received on cable; indeed, cable set-top boxes contain modems which can receive full resolution streaming video.

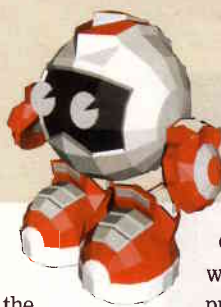


Static hopes its beat-'em-up King Fu could become a programme as well as a game

what happens when the first commercial of a break comes on and it has interactive content.

"The viewer presses the i-button and it takes them to a site where they can find out about the product, enter a competition, play a game, and then buy the product, all using their remote. But during that time, they're not watching the other ads and maybe not even the programme they were watching. Immediately, the rate-card is out the window." Sky's response has been to declare that only the last ad in a break would be interactive, so that programming not ads bears the brunt.

What's likely to happen, says Rock (it's an opinion backed by Andy Crosley of NTL), is a publishing model coming to TV. Magazines need a far



Low power can't afford to mean low quality. Designers will have to rediscover the basics for digital

smaller readership than programmes to survive, because ads reach the precise demographics required by advertisers. An interactive magazine (from music mag Q, already on Cable & Wireless, down to even local newspapers, Crosley hopes) can draw advertisers away from the blunderbuss of 30-seconds in the middle of *Coronation Street*.

But there's another barrier to small players in the market. The three different platforms all use different languages for their sites (see box right). The web took years to take off and it had only one language; what would have happened if anyone who wanted to create their own website had had to create it three times in three completely different ways?

Eunite's Sheffield says that if you already have a website, it'll be hard to convert it to an interactive site, but if you start from scratch, it shouldn't be too difficult (even easier if you use his company). Ironically, Sky's oxymoronically-titled Open platform is the hardest to write for, not least because of the charge levied on developers who want to obtain specifica-

tions for creating sites on its system.

The result is likely to be a two-tier service where big-name channels with the big-name programmes will be the only ones able to afford the best interactive content. Everyone else, apart from a few sharp innovators, will have the interactive status of web home pages.

So far from being the next big thing, unless a

clear standard emerges from the platform wars and some allowance is made for the less profitable branches of television, it might well become just the next Teletext.

Nevertheless, viewers' reaction to interactivity is always positive. The question is whether the novelty will wear off after the first bills start to arrive and the games start to wear thin.

INTERACTIVE SITES The three platforms use different languages for interactive sites. Open's is based on Open TV's proprietary format; On Digital uses MHEG-5; and cable uses HTML. As this is the web's lingua franca, designers don't have to be trained as for Open/On platforms; but as set-top boxes are only as powerful as 1992 PCs, they can't use the latest web browsers, only cut-down versions (so if you're used to Shock-wave animations, Java applets and streaming video, think again). Using over 256 colours is out except for backdrops; fonts must be large to cope with poor-quality TV pictures and the viewers' distance from the set (and a TV screen isn't resizeable). Also remember that Sky hosts your site in its "walled garden" but cable operators just connect to your server; anything that goes wrong is your fault. Cable can also offer internet access through TV - it may look awful, but the content will be there.

Assuming that the ITC, currently deciding if it can regulate internet via TV, says it will.

THE NATIONAL SHORT COURSE TRAINING PROGRAMME



The National Film and Television School

Beaconsfield Studios, Station Road, Beaconsfield, Buckinghamshire HP9 1LG

Tel: 01494 677903/671234 Fax: 01494 678708

If you work in the Film and Television Industry and need to retrain or upgrade your skills, then contact us.

Our Courses are short, intensive, cost effective, to industry standards and are taught by professionals.

We provide a variety of graded courses throughout the year in

CAMERA AND LIGHTING, SOUND, EDITING, WRITING AND DIRECTING, DESIGN, PRODUCING and for most PRODUCTION BASED AREAS.

For more information on our courses please contact the Short Course Unit.

SHOOTING

EDITING
online + offline

DUPLICATION

PRODUCTION
services + management

CREWS

BROADCAST

AVID

DIGI-BETA

DOCUMENTARIES

ALL UNDER ONE ROOF AT
CONSTRUCTIVE • SOHO • LONDON W1

www.constructive-video.co.uk
T: 020-7734-1563 & F: 020-7734-0015
ESTABLISHED 1985