What will tomorrow's television and personal computer screens have in common? We know the answer is 'interactive content', but the real question is where are those inventors and designers that will take the risk and succeed in the pioneering process? The answer may lie amongst those gathered last month to present their latest work at the AFI (American Film Institute) Enhanced TV workshop in Hollywood.

Tomorrow's TV Experience Debuts at AFI Workshop

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By Howard Greenfield

AFI's mission 'to preserve and advance the moving image' has earned it renown as one of the foremost resources for historic film and video industry archiving. It is also an advocate of next-generation delivery platforms. For the past three years, AFI's Enhanced TV Workshop has provided the setting for developing new interactive video prototypes. At the last meeting eleven workshop teams presented their designs to push the boundaries of television programming and the viewer's end-user experience.

The event's achievement was marked by a successful collaboration between the technical, business, and creative disciplines. As Nick De Martino, Director of AFI New Media Ventures, puts it, "Because innovation in this new medium will have a lasting impact on careers, technology, and business, we must involve TV producers directly with technologists, designers, and pioneering companies." De Martino adds that, "The main purpose of AFI's exploratory environment is to discover the best new ways to create interactive aspects to traditional, linear video programming. But the fascinating discoveries along the way were stated in different ways by different participants."

Among those taking part in the programme were broadcasters, producers, directors, and technical teams from PBS (Public Broadcasting System), AOL-Time Warner, HBO, Discovery Communications, Comedy Central, CNN, and others with mentoring teams drawn from the ranks of Sony Pictures Digital Entertainment, Microsoft TV, DirecTV, BBC Technologies, Razorfish, AT&T Digital Media, KPMG, Liberate Technologies, and Autonomy.

The exacting six-month development schedule began with concepts and team-building, moving rapidly through the creative design and development process, and then into final production. Most creations are based on video productions nearing completion or which have already aired. These include news genre such as 'CNN Headline News', public television documentaries such as 'Accordian Dreams', 'Woodrow Wilson', and 'People Like Us', as well as commercial broadcast series like HBO's Arli$$, Discovery Channel's 'Tournament of Champions' best-in-show dog contest, and Comedy Central's satiric 'The Daily Show'.

AFI American Film Institute

One group leader remarked about their audience, "We can't possibly satisfy everyone's need to access more data about our topic, so this is a great medium to do that. Because our goal is to deepen the viewing experience and not take away from the original pleasure or simplicity, we are looking for methods to easily maintain the original show's look and feel while enabling chat, community building, audience polling, and e-commerce for our advertisers."

Other workshop groups expressed a similar goal of templates and tools that make it easier for both writers and directors to create and deploy this new content. "We want enhancements that work hand in glove with the overall programming content and retain that linear experience."

Many applications were targeted for delivery through devices such as the Motorola / Liberate DCT 2000 set-top box, Microsoft Xbox, and Sony PlayStation 2. These platforms go beyond conventional television providing a broader creative palette for those building and delivering programming. They enable audience participation, hands-on entertainment, and wider information access. Examples include multiple language sound tracks and selective captioning that make cultural programming accessible to all viewer demographics. Associated articles, documents, and historical information provide deeper background than what is available in stand-alone video broadcasts. All this combined with a compelling interface, relevant statistics, and indexed interview material offers the viewer fuller, more complete access to their subject.

The time-honored mantra 'content is king' took on special meaning this week. It was asserted time and again by these new media leaders that content is what drives the convergence of media and will be the key change-agent from programming format to audience viewing habits. As the CNN project team remarked, "Our goal was to avoid the technology red herring. Viewers value content and simplicity - not the technologies required to deliver."

The AFI Enhanced TV workshop continues to be break new ground in the brave, new world of broadband because it is among the few to move beyond research and into broadcast. As AFI's Marcia Zellers puts it, "This year's effort goes way beyond R&D. The real significance of this year's set of projects is that they will carry over into commercial projects. Production teams have made air time their goal, and many will be implemented."

For more information about AFI and ways to participate in and sponsor next year's workshop see their website www.afionline.org or contact Marcia Zellers, AFI Director Enhanced TV, at mzellers@afionline.org .

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About the Writer.

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