Interactive children's television

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Whether television is beneficial or harmful to children is an ongoing debate. But one thing is certain: The more often young viewers can interact, the more attractive the program becomes. Two projects in the US are testing interactive technologies with children's programming.

In one of his songs, Herbert Grönemeyer suggests putting children in command of world affairs. At least when it comes to the TV remote, kids are definitely in charge. According to the industry magazine Media Perspektiven, German children spend an average of 100 minutes a day in front of the tube. Many have their own TV and are often confronted with content unsuitable for their age when channel surfing. Making children's programs more attractive through greater interactivity could potentially lessen the impact of this problem.

As part of an annual American Film Institute (AFI) workshop, the Fraunhofer Institute for Media Communication IMK, together with the Disney Channel and other partners, developed an interactive concept for the "Kim Possible" cartoon series. The idea was to increase children's involvement in the show. The IMK was the first German participant in the 6-month-long Enhanced TV Workshop which ended in December 2003. The core concept of the prototype episode is a digital trading card game representing the characters in the stories. Per remote control, young viewers can collect the cards during the show and swap them with other children using the set-top-box return channel. Incentives to collect all of the cards include bonus episodes of the series via video on demand or access codes to online games. The IMK developed software that simulates navigation of the game and system capacity, including

simulating heavy user participation.

"The Disney Channel naturally wants to increase viewer loyalty," says Thomas Tikwinski from the IMK Interactive TV Competence Center. In a separate project, the IMK is developing a similar concept for Nickelodeon's "Blue's Clues" series in the U.S. The show, for ages 2-8, presents children with everyday puzzles and problems which they are encouraged to solve with the help of the show's characters. The planned interactive version will allow them to influence the solution and the course of the show via remote control. "Since the target group's reading ability is not very high, we have to develop suitable symbols for the interactive program," says Tikwinski. In Germany, too, there is a definite interest in interactive TV. "But progress is being held back by the lack of a universal, standard technical platform," says Thomas Miles, editor and project manager for game development at KIKA, a children's channel co-produced by the German public broadcasters ARD and ZDF. "Children always find it more exciting to interact with the show." On the other hand: "Interaction does not make a poorly designed format any more appealing!"

Source: Fraunhofer-Gesellschaft