

Interactive TV From Internet May Be in Sight

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The Internet is starting to look the way interactive television was supposed to look.

Two years ago, cable, phone and computer companies formed a dizzying array of alliances that promised to use cable to bring video home-shopping and video-on-demand to the couch potatoes of America and Europe via the tube. Trials were announced, delayed and folded. Only a few produced paying customers.

Now some of the same companies, including Time Warner Inc., Tele-Communications Inc. and Oracle Corp., are rallying around the Internet's multimedia World Wide Web as a way to quickly and cheaply provide a watered-down version of interactive television to the masses.

Video-on-demand won't be included because it can't be delivered without massive computing power.

ViewCall Europe PLC of London says it has developed a box that will not only display the Web on TV but will also allow users to navigate with six buttons on a remote control. Internet browser software that ViewCall is developing on its own.

Oracle, one of the loudest advocates of a cheap Internet machine, says its own \$500 Net PC won't be on the market until February. In addition to a TV jack, the box will have a 12-inch computer monitor, the ability to work with cable modems and a stereo jack, Oracle says.

ViewCall Europe, the company working on a remote-control interface for the Internet, says it is two months behind schedule starting a one-thousand customer trial in London. Now it expects the box to start trials in January.

ViewCall Chairman John Bentley plans to rent the boxes to consumers for under \$4 a week—first in Europe and later next year in the U.S. — and to earn the bulk of his revenue from fees that content providers will pay to be on ViewCall's Web site.

@ Home is taking a different tack. Instead of turning the TV into an Internet monitor, the TCI venture aims to bring TV-style programming to today's PCs via high-speed cable modems. With the technology, @ Home customers could watch live video in one window and click on surrounding documents for the full text of an interview or links to related documents, video and audio. @ Home plans to start rolling out the service in Sunnyvale, Calif., around March for \$35 to \$50 a month.

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