Smart TVs Get Smarter, By Just A Little Bit

Ryan Nakashima, Associated Press

LAS VEGAS (AP) — In the not-so-distant future, couch potatoes will be waving, pointing, swiping and tapping to make their TVs react, kind of like what Tom Cruise did in the 2002 movie "Minority Report." That's the vision of TV manufacturers as they show off "smart TVs."

The sets will recognize who's watching and will try to guess what viewers want to see. They'll respond to more natural speech and will connect with your smartphone in a single touch.

The idea is to make TV watching easier and more pleasant as viewers are confronted with more and more choices — from the hundreds of live TV channels from the cable or satellite provider to online video services such as Netflix Inc., Hulu and Apple's iTunes. A traditional remote control that lets you flip through channels one at a time suddenly seems inadequate.

At a speech this week, Samsung President Boo-Keun Yoon said the company was developing "TVs that have the power to create the ultimate lean-back experience."

But don't worry about "Big Brother" looking back at you. Manufacturers such as Samsung Electronics Co. will allow motion-capturing cameras to be pointed away.

Gesture recognition still has a long ways to go, and in some demonstrations at this week's International CES show in Las Vegas, voice commands got lost in translation.

At a crowded Samsung booth, one attendant demonstrated how hand gestures were used to play simple kids' games. Raising her hand brought up an on-screen cursor. Grasping the air was equivalent to clicking on what her digital hand was hovering over.

However, when she tried the same gestures on a menu of TV-watching options, the TV didn't respond well. When she tried to give a kind of sideways wave — like Queen Elizabeth greeting her subjects — the page didn't swipe to the left as it should have.

The technology appeared less responsive compared with the Xbox 360's Kinect motion-control system, which seems to do a much better job at swiping through menus.

Later, in a quiet, enclosed Samsung booth, the TV struggled to comprehend voice commands. The TV was asked, "find me a movie with Tom Cruise," and correctly pulled up an online trailer of his latest movie, "Jack Reacher." The system was then asked to "find me dramas." The command "Number 3" was given to choose the third option in the results, but the TV instead started a new search and offered a

range of viewing options for "Sommersby."

There are some safeguards in place so that the TV wouldn't misinterpret casual conversations or gestures as actual commands. You'd need to press a button before giving a voice command, and you'd need to stand still for a few seconds and raise one hand before an on-screen cursor would appear for gesture commands.

Paul Gagnon, a TV analyst with research firm NPD Group, said these technologies are still in their early days.

"Most interaction I've had with gesture and voice control ... it's not real great right now," he said. "Right now, a lot of people in the industry are just trying to explore the possibilities."

The TV makers' new interactive features fared better when they reverted to the traditional remote control format, with some twists.

Samsung's new remote has a touch-enabled track pad that swiped through menus similar to smartphone screens on Android and Apple mobile devices.

Panasonic Corp. is also including a track pad and a microphone on its new remote — though it faces similar challenges recognizing commands. A voice command for "Breaking Bad" on video brought up Google search results on a Web browser, as opposed to opportunities to watch the show.

LG Electronics Inc.'s newest "Magic Remote" controller was incredibly precise in directing where an on-screen pointer should be. It uses Bluetooth wireless technology along with a gyroscope inside the controller itself. It worked even from a great distance or when facing in the opposite direction.

LG's voice command worked well in searching for programs on live TV, Web video apps and even the broader Internet. When an attendant pressed the voice input button and spoke into the microphone on the controller asking for "Channel 5," one of items presented was the Bing search results showing the website of the Channel 5 TV broadcaster in Las Vegas.

When asked for "The Dark Knight Rises," the TV showed that it was available for rental or purchase on-demand through the Vudu online video app and brought up that app on the TV.

Another feature demonstrated on an LG TV was a way to mirror what's on your smartphone or tablet with the TV. Using what's known as "near-field communications," an attendant touched his Android phone to a kind of sticky pad that was stuck onto the TV stand. After interacting with the chip inside the pad, the phone was paired with the TV. The phone then brought up two arrows, one for "Phone to TV" and the other "TV to Phone."

By swiping up for "Phone to TV," whatever was on the phone then showed up on the big screen. Swiping the other way brought out a set of controls for using the phone

like a remote control.

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