



Performance Media Industries, Ltd.

Is HDTV Getting Better?
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by A. Grimani

I'm on my third day of walking the immense halls of the Consumer Electronics Show, amazed at the bewildering changes ahead and pondering how they will affect the wonderful world of home theater.

The changes mainly look like this: Bigger, brighter pictures for less money, bigger, louder multi-channel sound for less money, and the promise of full system automation for less money. Plasma sets of 76-80" featured on some booths and higher-end Home Theater in a Box audio packages at other booths make it look like things might get easier for a change... However, even though it may look like a lot of this stuff is getting easier to do, the plethora of technology choices, configuration options, and ultimate quality just make it all the more complex and confusing. That's why it's so important that you understand what you really need and what really works.

Realize that HDTV program material is really required to make all these new projectors, plasma TVs, and multi-channel audio systems sing. I find that even well-transferred DVDs just don't look that great on a really large screen. I guess my eyes have gotten pickier with time; 480 lines with 5.5 MHz bandwidth just doesn't cut it anymore. I want HDTV! I want it all the time; I want it everywhere; and I want it now! But I find that most people aren't even aware of its availability, and fewer have ever seen a well-done demonstration. Sorry, the HD demos at Best Buy and Circuit City just don't count!

I had been hearing of new HDTV offers from lots of sources, so I wanted to find out about all the choices at the show. Much to my delight, many exhibitors were showcasing their wares. On the satellite side, we now have Dish Network, DirecTV, and newcomer Voom (offering 39 HD channels) up and running. Many cable companies now offer HDTV packages. Of course we have D-VHS. Now, it finally looks like we may have some viable disc-based HD offerings. Several manufacturers were showing prototype samples of Blu-ray player/recorders that can store up to 25 GB per layer, allowing video recording rates up to 36 Mbps. (Broadcast-quality HD video is 19 Mbps.) This is a completely new hardware platform, with a blue-violet laser pickup that runs at

a shorter wavelength (405 nm) for higher storage density. It isn't clear when software will be plentiful and when players will be available, but the technology sure is cool!

On the more "now" front, Microsoft was at the show in force, pushing Windows Media Player 9 High Definition Video. I have to say it looks really good. It's particularly interesting because the format supports compression of HD pictures and multi-channel sound into a standard DVD at 9 Mbps. There's no need for a major hardware platform overhaul, and compatibility is maintained. But there's a catch. Our friends at Microsoft would like to have us believe that we must shift to a PC-type platform to enjoy the benefits of WMVHD, as it is known. Some of the representatives at the Microsoft booth went so far as to tell me that no stand-alone players were planned. Consumers will simply use a PC with the Windows Media Center platform, and life will be grand. The problem I have with this approach is that, just in writing this article, my laptop running Windows XP crashed twice, and I'm not willing to accept that level of unreliability in my home theater! So, I went over to another innovator's booth and saw a stand-alone unit that plays virtually any type of disc media, incorporates a WM9 decoder, and outputs HD video over DVI and Component, as well as decoded 5.1-channel audio. This product belonged to a Danish newcomer to the US market called KISS Technologies. They build OEM products for other brands too, and have, in my view, taken the right approach to the stand-alone product feature set. Their DP-600 player includes an 80 GB hard drive, an Ethernet port for streaming A/V files from any other server device on a network, a card slot for wireless networks, and a host of other cool interconnectivity features. It will play MPEG2, MPEG4, DivX, XviD, and WMA files. Using commands in the onscreen display, you can access the KISS portal website and from there go to various music-on-demand sites to download your favorite programs. They are working on video-on-demand sites now, and the graphic interface I saw in the demo was very intuitive. To me, this is the right way to do a source component in a system: a centralized unit that does all the playing, sourcing, accessing, etc., for the system and puts out a unified audio and video format so that you don't have to mess with complex switching for every source.

Now, from the above list you can see that the choices in HD programming are already getting pretty deep, and it's easy to be overwhelmed and confused. With a little time and patience, though, you can figure out all the choices, offers, features, and interface options. Stay informed of the developments, and you can actually set up an HD A/V system with wirelessly networked signal distribution! It's a lot of work, but you have really cool toys to assist you.

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