

Top 10 things seen at CES

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I realize that in the grand scheme of things readers don't care whether the job of a reporter is made easier or not. But I must admit that one of the cooler things at the show was that Sony, Phillips, Delphi and a few other companies made their press kits available on really small, easy-to-carry USB-based flash drives. Maybe someday companies will abandon those annoying, big, thick paper press packets.

You've purchased a brand new \$3,000 flat-panel High Definition television set. Now what do you do with it? Until recently, there wasn't very much content available for your expensive new television; in the last year this has changed. Now most of the major cable operators and satellite television companies offer some HD programming. Until Voom HD most of the available HD content was limited rebroadcast content from Premium services (HBO, Stars, etc.) or cable networks like

Discovery HD and ESPN HD. What makes Voom HD different is that it is creating specific, niche, channels in HD. At the show Voom announced 12 new channels including Monsters HD (a channel that showcases horror films in High Definition), Gameplay HD (a channel devoted to video games where you can watch live tournaments, game trailers, etc.), Kung Fu HD (a channel devoted to Kung Fu) and others. Voom is available on satellite through its partnership with DishNetwork. In addition to Voom HD, HDTV owners will have next-generation game consoles and the next generation of DVDs to provide further HD content. So the promise of HD content is finally being realized.

It's popular to beat up on the big bully, but Microsoft's upcoming suite of products from Windows Vista to Office 12 to its new Windows Media "Urge" shows that MS really understands where entertainment software and hardware is going and how ease-of-use and added-value features will make the difference between winning and losing in the battle for the living room. Vista will be more than an incremental upgrade; the next Windows will focus heavily on ease-of-use and cleaner navigation and will be more "Mac-like" than ever, going so far as to include a "3D View" that allows you to view all of your open tabs in gorgeous circular 3D windows. The new design and interface is elegant in its simplicity. Beyond the new interface, companies can now create little "gadgets" or "widgets" for your desktop that will give you instant access to updated content and applications. Vista has something called "Super Fetch" that helps manage memory to get the most out of available RAM.

Microsoft's team up with MTV finally brings us a direct competitor to iTunes. Sure we have Rhapsody (which I personally use and love), Napster and Yahoo! Music. But it's the MS/MTV URGE venture that has the marketing and financial muscle to take on iTunes' dominance in a very real way. URGE will feature a subscription service of more than 2 million tracks, access to MTV's video library and more. It's not clear if the video content will be exclusively MTV/VH1/Viacom or if it will be

open to anyone with Video or Podcasts like iTunes is.

With media-center PCs being the buzz word, Intel has launched a brand-new initiative called Viiv. The goal is to make it easier for consumers to easily select the right hardware for their entertainment needs. PCs based on Intel Viiv technology will have a remote control and will be powered by a suite of Intel technologies, including a dual-core processor, platform software and wired networking capabilities. Now that "convergence" is popular again, hardware makers are moving away from the big bulky PC Case and moving towards a smaller, leaner, "cable box" look. From a software standpoint, Yahoo! will bring a suite of services to Viiv-enabled computers including Yahoo! Go TV, Yahoo! Photos, Yahoo! Music and My Yahoo! Channel. AOL has also signed a deal with Intel to bring AOL's new video services to Viiv-enabled televisions and equipment.

Apple's iPod wasn't the first portable media device to play video. It was simply the first to get it right. Now hardware makers like Phillips, Samsung, Toshiba, LG and even DishNetwork all have newer, sleeker multi-media centers coming to market. The problem with all of these excellent devices is that there still isn't a uniform place like iTunes where users can easily transfer video and MP3s. Napster, Yahoo! Music, Rhapsody, Sony Connect and Urge are still geared towards music, and not things like Podcasts or video.



PocketDISH: AV700E

The closest these device makers have come is DishNetwork's amazing "PocketDish" machine. The super-slim AV700E features a slick 7" widescreen screen, 40 GB hard drive and more. It's not the hardware that makes this thing so unique, it's how easy it is to use. If you have DishNetwork's DVR or TiVo To Go, you simply connect the PocketDish to your DVR via the USB port and transfer your programming. The drawback to the PocketDish is its large screen size. Not exactly something you fit in your "pocket," but it is super slim and lightweight, perfect for that business trip or vacation. Toshiba has a direct iPod competitor in its new line of Gigabeats that will now support video.

With Sony's slick new Location Free TV box into your cable connection you'll be able to view any television program on your PSP. The device is very expensive, especially once you factor the cost of a \$250 PSP into the equation. But the concept is sound. With Mobi TV you can watch live on your mobile phone or other internet connected mobile devices.

I love the concept of eBooks, but there's never been an e-reader that completed the consumer loop (meaning, once you bought one, the only place to view it was on your computer). Yes, Palm tried to create one, but the device was too small to make reading for a long time on it a viable option. Sony's new "Sony Reader" is the killer device that finally let users carry around electronic versions of all of their books. The reader is the size of a standard paperback book but is thin and lightweight. This machine features a 6", clear, black-and-white screen and stores up to 75 books on its internal memory card, and you can expand its capacity by adding a memory stick or SD card. They say the battery life lasts up to 7,500 page turns. You'll be able to purchase a large variety of eBooks in the Sony Connect store.

CES featured a surprising number of announcements regarding Hollywood's endorsement of broadband content. The week started with Stars Entertainment announcing the launch of their new Stars Vongo Service (stupid name, that's hard to remember). For \$9.99 a month computer users will practically have access to Stars' entire library of movies, TV shows and more, all available on-demand. ESPN Mobile had a big presence in the central hall as it touted its new custom-branded mobile phones and deep library of mobile content. AOL, meanwhile, was touting its Video-On-Demand service.

I can spew my hatred over unnecessary format wars, but I'd just be wasting my breath. The backers of Blu-Ray and HD-DVD are going to battle it out despite the history of format wars benefiting nobody. From a visual standpoint, I really didn't see much of a difference between the two formats. They both feature stunning displays, both have incredibly large storage capabilities, and they both feature heavy hitters supporting them. On the HD-DVD side you have Microsoft, Toshiba, HP and more than 80 other companies. On the Blu-Ray side you have Sony, Apple and others. Content makers, especially Hollywood studios, seem to be hedging their bets and offering support to both standards, while Fox and Columbia appear to be supporting Blu-Ray. The Playstation 3 will support Blu-Ray only, and Microsoft announced an HD-DVD add-on for its Xbox 360. This war promises to be long and messy; it's too early to see how it's going to shake out. If I had to lay money, I would say Blu-Ray will be the clear dominant factor thanks largely to the support of the Playstation 3. But the HD-DVD group had a better CES -- they had "real" announcements including product launch dates, pricing, specs and more. Toshiba will be first to market with a HD-DVD player priced at \$499 or \$799. The product will be on store shelves in March or April. Later this spring Samsung will have a Blu-Ray DVD player available at around \$1,000.

Mobile phones are taking major lengths forward. Convergence is in full

force with next-generation cell phones as a lot will support MP3 playback, Mobile Video and more. Verizon announced a new music download service, Motorola has iRadio, a new radio service that features over 435 radio stations, and Google has a new search feature for mobile phones. Almost every major manufacturer including Nokia, Samsung, LG, Phillips, Sony Ericsson, Toshiba and Palm showcased slicker, more stylish and feature-rich mobile phones. Motorola started this trend with its slim RAZR Phones, but other hardware makers are going to the next level. It's hard to select a winner in this category, but you can't go wrong with Palm's Treo 700 Windows CE-enabled phone, Sony's new W810 Walkman phone that can store up to 15 CDs worth of music, Samsung's new slim phones or one of LG's new models -- I especially liked the F9200.

Pioneer's Inno and Samsung's Helix line of XM2go devices are small, sleek and feature MP3 players that are capable of playing XM Radio via their integrated antennas. Both products let you "time-shift" programs by recording stations for later playback. Not only that, but you can record XM Radio programs directly into MP3 format and more. Samsung will have at least two different models available in March; one will require a docking station to receive XM programming, and the higher-end model will be a true portable with built-in XM Satellite Tuner.

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