

# TVs getting 'smarter' but maybe not better

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If last week's Consumer Electronics Show is any indication, the next major computing device to enter consumers' homes will be a "smart" television - whether viewers like it or not.

The new TVs will let users play "Angry Birds," instantly view photos taken by multiple people and shared online, or try on virtual clothes without needing a game console or a set-top box. And they'll allow users to change the channel or search for TV shows by waving at the screen or using their voice.

While television manufacturers have been hawking smart or Internet-connected televisions at CES for the past three years, those capabilities are now making their way into mainstream sets. The most advanced of those TVs are starting to gain features previously found only on computing devices, including powerful [microprocessors](#), full operating systems and sophisticated input mechanisms that go far beyond the standard remote controls.

[Computer maker](#) Lenovo showed off a new [smart TV](#) at CES that has specs you'd expect to find in the latest smartphones, including the newest version of Google's Android operating system and a [dual-core processor](#). LG unveiled televisions running the latest version of Google [TV software](#), which is a variation of [Android](#). And Samsung displayed televisions that include a camera-based sensor similar to the Kinect device for Microsoft's [Xbox 360](#).

Nuance Communications, the company that provides the [voice-](#)

[recognition](#) capability underlying the Siri technology in Apple's [iPhone 4S](#), demonstrated TVs that allow users to search for comedies, say, by simply saying that.

Meanwhile, Bodymetrics, a London-based startup, showed off how consumers could use a Kinect-like device to turn their living room into a virtual dressing room. Users see a representation of themselves on their TV that moves in sync with them. They can select different clothes and see instantly how they fit and look.

But consumer demand for smart TV is uncertain. Early versions of [Google](#) TV devices have been around since late 2010, but have seen disappointing sales. And while many televisions sold in the past year or two can be connected to the Internet, many never are.

Many consumers may want to watch Netflix on their big screen, but whether anyone other than tech geeks will want to use them to surf the Web, check their Twitter feed or use smartphone-like apps is far from clear.

The flurry of innovation is driven less by consumer demand than by the declining sales and profits of television manufacturers. They hope adding new features will shore up prices and spur sales of new sets. With 3-D technology having failed to generate much interest, they now hope smart TVs will save them.

Manufacturers also feel pressure from a company that wasn't at CES - Apple. The company has reportedly been working on a smart TV for years and is widely expected to release it by the end of next year. Apple's late co-founder Steve Jobs told biographer Walt Isaacson that Apple had developed a revolutionary but simple interface for the device.

In the past decade, Apple's iPod, iPhone and iPad have upended the

music player, mobile phone and computer businesses. Many traditional TV makers seem to be trying to avoid the same fate.

But while just about everyone seems to agree that TVs are going to get smarter, there's no consensus at all on just what that means.

Manufacturers, service providers, software makers and analysts disagree on fundamental issues, such as how consumers will interact with smart TVs and what they will do with them. They also disagree on technical standards.

For example, smart TVs come with a wide range of controllers.

Depending on the set and the manufacturer, users may be able to talk to it, wave their hands at it, use a motion-sensing [remote control](#), use their smartphone as a virtual remote control, or use a full-size or scaled-down keyboard. As a result, the way you control the TV in your living room may be different from how you control the one in your bedroom.

Similarly, the interface and operating system can differ from one smart TV to another, even among sets from one manufacturer. So even if both of your televisions are made by LG, say, you may not be able to run the same applications on both.

The geek in me finds this kind of experimentation exciting. But as a consumer I'm worried that without some kind of standardization, there's going to be a lot of confusion and frustration.

And smart or not, that's the last thing you want from the boob tube.

**More information:** *Troy Wolverton is a technology columnist for the San Jose Mercury News.*

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