The High-Def High Life

Just as we expected, this year’s Consumer Electronics Show was all about high definition. A late round of price cuts sent HDTVs flying off the shelves this past holiday season, and it looks as if the high-def rush will continue through 2007. The number of HDTV channels continues to grow, and even those new-fangled Blu-ray and HD DVD players are starting to sell. Jack Wrigley, vice president of sales at MusicGiants, summed things up nicely: “This show is all about the high-definition lifestyle.”

That got me thinking, what exactly is a high-definition lifestyle? Are we just talking about better-looking TVs? Maybe, but I think the high-definition movement is about much more than big screens.

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It’s about quality—quality of both audio and video. Take MusicGiants itself. Although the company has started a downloadable high-def video service, it is primarily a source for very high-quality audio. The tracks you download from iTunes are fine for casual listening, but they can’t compare with the nice, warm sound of an old vinyl record or even the cold clarity of a CD. Connect that iPod or MP3 player to your stereo and you will hear how digital music often fails. It sounds flat.

Not so with the tracks you get from MusicGiants. Whereas iTunes and most other download services encode tracks at 128 or 192 Kbps, MusicGiants encodes its tracks at 1,100 Kbps in Windows Media Audio (WMA) Lossless format. It is truly CD quality. These are tracks you will want to keep forever. Sure, they take up a lot of hard drive space, but a digital library is still more compact than that rack of CDs.

MusicGiants may be overkill for a portable listening experience, but digital music isn’t just about iPods. I never listen to CDs anymore: My music comes from satellite radio (admittedly low-def), my PC, or an iPod connected directly to my home stereo. In this environment, high-definition tracks make all the difference. And the tracks cost just 30 cents more than the crappy ones you buy on iTunes.

In some ways, the case for high-definition video is muddier. Everyone wants to watch “the big game” in high definition, but in fact, most of the “HDTV” you see on cable and satellite TV is compressed, which can introduce artifacts and distortion. Just ask Lance Ulanoff. In his latest column (see page 69), he talks about the consistent pixelization and frozen images that plagued his Cablevision HD channels before he switched over to a state-of-the-art fiber TV connection. Better yet, check out Robert Heron’s Expert View on the subject (see “HD Inequality” on page 82).

Until now, people have been happy simply to have a clear picture. In a high-definition world, TV viewers will demand more. The quality of an HD broadcast will soon become a reason to switch cable providers. Offering 500 channels is less appealing than having 50 great-looking high-def broadcasts. The Internet is better suited for on-demand microcasting, anyway.

If you are brave enough to invest in either a Blu-ray or HD DVD player, you are guaranteed better quality, but even so, you will need a mighty big TV—50 inches or larger—to really appreciate the added detail. Given the format war, most people will probably be better off with a decent upscaling DVD player.

As it is, people who are willing to buy a Blu-ray or HD DVD movie want it to be the last version of that movie they ever buy. They want it to be future-proof. Until one of these standards goes away, that wish seems unlikely to be granted.

Some have a different wish. At CES, the other big topic of conversation was whether adult movies would be available on Blu-ray discs. Adult titles are just now being released on HD DVD—the first being the poignant, powerful Camp Cuddly Pines: Power Tool Massacre. Conventional wisdom has it that Sony’s refusal to allow porn on Betamax led to the format’s current role as a technological footnote and easy punch line.

The Blu-ray Consortium has since said it will accept all content providers into its fold, so porn is probably not a big issue after all. Personally, I think this is one area where we can do without high definition. And that goes for both audio and video.