THE TAKE

TV's Next Dimension
Why goofy glasses are in your future.

BY DANIEL LYONS

IN EARLY AUGUST I traveled to Secaucus, N.J., and saw the future of television. My epiphany took place at the North American headquarters of Panasonic, where a prototype 3-D TV system was running on a 103-inch plasma screen with a home-theater surround-sound system. It was, in a word, stunning. Remember the first time you saw high-def television? Imagine that experience on steroids. We saw 3-D footage shot at the Beijing Olympics, including that larger-than-life opening ceremony in the Bird's Nest stadium and a soccer game that was more vivid and lifelike than anything I've ever seen on a screen. It felt as if we were standing at the edge of the pitch. I'm not a big sports fan, but the first thing I thought was that the "killer app" for this technology will be sports. Monday Night Football will never be the same again. ESPN, which embraced HD and boomed because of it, is going to have a field day.

Panasonic's first 3-D sets will go on sale next year. The company hasn't announced any actual models yet, and there's no info on pricing, either, except that 3-D sets will cost more than regular HD sets. So it's still the early days. I know what you're thinking—you've seen those crazy 3-D movies, and they were at best annoying and at worst almost painful. They're loaded up with gimmicks, like shards of glass that seem to fly out of the screen. But content creators are starting to take a more subtle approach to 3-D. The idea is not to freak you out with special effects, but rather to create an immersive experience. The new 3-D content doesn't call attention to its three-dimensionality. At best, the effect becomes invisible. In fact, during the demonstration at Panasonic, I actually forgot I was watching 3-D.

Yes, you need to wear special glasses. They're not the cheapo ones that you sometimes get in the movie theater. These contain electronics that receive a signal from transmitters attached to the screen. Those signals let the glasses shutter the left and right lenses on and off, in sync with the image on the screen. This high-speed flashing is not perceptible to the human eye but creates the perception of three-dimensionality. The glasses, bulky and inconvenient, may be the biggest hurdle this technology needs to overcome to achieve widespread adoption. Who wants to sit around with a bunch of friends, all wearing goofy glasses?

Certainly the people who make movies are dying for 3-D to catch on. They're already cranking out 3-D films and finding that these flicks generate better box-office revenues. Now they want to extend that experience from the cinema into the home. James Cameron, director of Titanic, is making a 3-D movie called Avatar that is slated to arrive in cinemas in December. Cameron has been showing clips of the movie at conferences, and people have been impressed. A huge 3-D hit in theaters could spark a 3-D craze and create demand for 3-D sets at home. This, anyway, is what execs at Panasonic are hoping. Game developer Ubisoft is developing an Avatar game that will be released in both 2-D and 3-D versions. "It's not just a gimmick. We think 3-D is here to stay," says Patrick Naud, executive producer at Ubisoft, in San Francisco.

There are different ways of producing 3-D effects, but the one Panasonic employs, which it calls "Full HD 3D," involves shooting a scene with two HD cameras placed side by side. Each camera records a full 1,080-pixel high-definition video stream—one for the left eye, one for the right. Panasonic says its 3-D method produces a better experience than one in which a single 1,080-pixel image is split into two halves, which are then shown in alternating left-right flashes. Given the contentious nature of the consumer-electronics business, it's easy to imagine the 3-D world devolving into a brutal format war, like the one between HD DVD and Blu-ray, which slowed adoption of high-definition discs before Blu-ray finally triumphed. But Robert Perry, executive vice president of Panasonic Consumer Electronics, says that's unlikely because the method Panasonic is using is "the only one that is acceptable to the studios."

We'll have to wait and see on that one. To get into the 3-D game, you'll need a new TV, obviously, as well as a new Blu-ray player that can play 3-D discs, and a new HDMI cable that can handle the extra data associated with 3-D content. The first stuff you'll see will be on discs, but Panasonic expects 3-D content will be delivered on cable and satellite, and even, eventually, on broadcast TV. It took eight or nine years for HD sets to reach widespread adoption, and 3-D will likely follow a similar curve.

Panasonic execs have no doubt that 3-D will be a hit. If you still think you'll never put a 3-D set in your house, just wait until you go into a store next year and see one. And keep in mind that back in the 1990s people were saying that HD would never catch on because regular TV was already good enough. Now we've all got HD sets. In a decade or so, I bet we'll all have 3-D.

LYONS writes about technology for NEWSWEEK.

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