Rose-Colored 3D Glasses

The big story in 2010, especially at January’s Consumer Electronics Show (CES), is the seemingly inevitable march toward 3D TV. Nearly every major manufacturer announced a high-end 3D HDTV in January, including Sony, Vizio, and LG. (Sharp was the exception.)

And there will be new 3D content: Sony and the Discovery Channel will partner on rolling out an all-3D channel, and ESPN has already started plugging the upcoming ESPN 3D on SportsCenter. Add in the good timing of the country’s blockbuster movie Avatar—earning $650 million and counting—which is also in 3D, by the way. But there is just one little problem that no one at CES discussed and no one even now seems to want to talk about: 3D TV just doesn’t look very good.

The Downside of 3D

I saw Avatar in 3D at an IMAX theater. I liked the movie, and I didn’t even mind wearing those goofy cardboard glasses. The film was spectacular, but I have to admit that the 3D effects fell flat. Although parts of the picture would pop, the rest of the screen seemed to suffer for it. More often than not, the effects distracted from the story instead of enhancing it. For example, there was one scene in which some insects buzzing in the foreground really caught me, but other than that, I think I would have preferred watching the movie in plain old 2D, as long as it included IMAX, Dolby Surround, and a really comfy seat.

What’s more, the viewing experience for me became less about the story and more about spotting 3D effects. That novelty might fade with time, but so will the patience with wearing those silly glasses. If you want a formula for failure, ask your customers to change their behavior to use your product. Wearing 3D glasses is tolerable for an event like Avatar, but are the guys really going to gather around for the Sunday games wearing goggles? Probably not. Definitely not, if the effects are as poor as what I saw at CES.
Despite my reservations, I do think there is a future for 3D TV. It just isn’t in the near future.

The Real Costs
If that weren’t enough, you must also consider the major expense of retrofitting your living room for 3D. For most consumers, the privilege of watching a 3D version of Avatar at home could cost as much as $4,000 after you factor in the cost of a 3D-capable TV and 3D-compliant Blu-ray player. After all, a big reason vendors are pushing 3D is so they can start selling HDTVs for more than $1,000 again. (One savvy PC Mag staffer found a 47-inch Sharp LCD HDTV that does full 1080p for just $800. Score!) The economy might be turning upward, but nonetheless, not many of us can afford high-end TVs these days.

Remembering 3D’s History
I should note that 3D TVs have been on the market for years. Mitsubishi has been touting the 3D capabilities of its DLP HDTVs, mainly as a key differentiator for games. Did you know that? No? That probably means there hasn’t been a huge market for such products. In a post-Avatar and ESPN 3D world, that will certainly change. But it will also take a while before 3D TV really goes mainstream.

I’m not being naive about costs; they will come down eventually. When the hordes howled at the $1,000 price tags for Blu-ray players a few years back, I told people to relax and wait for the volumes to bring prices down. Now, for just $150, no one would consider just buying a DVD player or, incidentally, a Blu-ray player without some built-in Internet streaming capability.) Of course, prices will fall, but not in 2010. Probably not even in 2011.

Gamers as Early Adopters
The one group with whom I see 3D catching on faster is gamers. Nvidia and others are pushing 3D programming into gaming—and it is working. Gamers tend to be patient with new technologies, especially if those technologies increase the realism of game play. Can you imagine a bunch of geeks huddled in front of their TVs playing Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3 in 3D? Yeah, me too.

Despite my reservations, I do think there is a future for 3D TV. It just isn’t in the near future. In many ways, the advent of 3D is akin to the early days of HD, where there were a handful of channels that a pathetically small number of people could actually watch. Who am I to argue with research firms like DisplaySearch, which predicts the 3D TV market will reach $1.1 billion in 2010 and swell to $15.8 billion by 2015? That may be, but Dan Costa Research guesstimates those sets will be showing 2D content 92 percent of the time they are on.

And if anyone tells you differently, those aren’t 3D goggles they are wearing—they’re rose-colored glasses.

TALK BACK TO DAN E-mail your thoughts to dan_costa@pcmag.com.