THE REBIRTH OF PLASMA

If plasmas are on their way out and LCDs are taking over, as sales figures might suggest, nobody told Pioneer. The company completely redesigned its plasma technology to produce the sharpest, most vivid picture you'll find on any TV. The effort was code-named Project Kuro, Japanese for "black," and that's where this screen really sets itself apart.

The biggest challenge for any flat-panel TV technology is producing dark blacks, which create the contrast that makes other colors stand out. In LCDs, a constant backlight seeping through makes even dark pixels look gray. Plasmas have a different problem. Each tiny cell in the screen must be primed with an electric charge so it's ready to fire up quickly, and that charge turns blacks slightly gray. Pioneer designed cells that require far less charge. Then it added a screen filter that further dampens excess light from the cells and reflects less room light. The result: Blacks are 80 percent darker than on Pioneer's earlier models.

The TV's new processor fixes other image problems. It effectively removes fuzzy "video noise" from the picture. And it eliminates the choppienss of DVD movies by taking 24-frames-per-second film content and generating additional frames to match the 60fps of the television. $4,500; pioneerelectronics.com

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