

In Home Electronics, the Future Now Has a Due Date

By DAVID ELRICH

FOR years now, electronics manufacturers have promised that homes would soon be cocoons outfitted with every type of entertainment and information component. No longer far-off fantasies, such devices were on display at the Consumer Electronics Show here earlier this month. What's more, many will be on the market in a few months.

Finally, key pieces of the home electronics future have some price tags and arrival times. Here is an update.

Digital Video Disks

Ear-splitting demonstrations of the digital video disk reverberated throughout the Las Vegas Convention Center. The five-inch disk, or DVD, has been called the closest thing to movie-theater quality for the television, with images almost twice as good as those on videotape and the same Dolby digital sound that blares forth in cineplexes.

Warner Home Video, MGM Home Entertainment, Polygram and New Line announced that they would start

releasing DVD movies in March. Prices will be comparable to those for videotapes, at \$19 to \$29, and the first releases will include special-effects extravaganzas like "Twister" and "Space Jam."

Toshiba said it would release its DVD movie player in February. Panasonic will follow in March, and Sony in April. Prices will start at \$599.

And Blockbuster Entertainment announced that it would begin demonstrating the Sony DVD movie player at selected stores in April.

The disks, which look like compact disks, deliver their promised depth and richness, and it can be startling: even individual strands of hair are visible.

The sound — providing you have a good surround-sound system consisting of a receiver and five speakers — really can compete with a movie theater's. Over all, the disks do not have the quality of film, but it is close and certainly better than that of laser disks, which are larger.

Should you run out and buy a DVD player and send your VCR to the Smithsonian? Hardly. Only 50 movies will be out on the DVD format by spring. And DVD players with recording capability are still three years away.

Before DVD movie players be-

come a living-room fixture, the selection of films needs to be wider and the prices for the players lower. But the DVD experience is worth going to an electronics store for a demonstration.

Better Video Quality for PC's

It may be harder to wait for DVD for the home computer: digital video disks improve computer video quality from something that resembles a jerky silent movie to the quality of television.

Toshiba was the first to announce that its personal computers with built-in DVD drives will be in stores by April; the technology will add about \$760 to the price of a computer. Buying a separate DVD drive for an existing computer will cost about the same.

The increased storage capacity of the drives is a big selling point. For example, Phonedisc, a list of 115 million phone numbers nationwide, will be available on one disk, rather than on five CD-ROMS.

Like DVD movie players, DVD computer drives will probably be a better investment in a year or two. The price of drives and disks, now \$50 to \$199, should drop significantly, and more software will be available.

Slim Televisions

The television suitable for hanging on the wall has arrived. Philips Electronics, Panasonic and Sony demonstrated 40- to 42-inch televisions just four inches thick.

Philips expects to have them available this summer for "over \$10,000," according to the company. Other makers will not speculate about a release date or price, but most likely, more flat televisions will hit stores late next year when digital broadcasting begins. It will probably take a few years before they are more affordable.

The new flat televisions use gas plasma technology instead of the 50-year-old cathode ray tube technology. The picture on the Philips model looked the best — it was about the same as a high-quality standard television. The other flat televisions, all prototypes, had bugs to be worked out: all were plagued with blurry patches called digital artifacts, which floated across the screen.

Internet in a Dish

A big complaint about the Internet is that it takes too long to download anything that is fun. Hughes Network Systems demonstrated a 36-inch satellite dish called the Convergence

Antenna that makes the process 15 times faster than with a standard modem.

Instead of getting the Internet through telephone lines, users subscribe to Hughes's satellite Internet service, called Direc PC. In a demonstration, a 90-second animation clip that normally takes an hour to download arrived in less than two minutes.

But speed costs: Direc PC costs about \$150 a month for unlimited access; the Convergence Antenna is about \$850. The dish also picks up 175 channels on television.

Scraped-Up Telephones

The Cidco iPhone display at the show was mobbed by conventioners watching demonstrations of a phone with a 4-by-7-inch touch screen that allows users to surf the Internet. Like other telephones that can connect to the Internet, the iPhone has a small pull-out keyboard that also lets the user tap out E-mail messages. But its liquid-crystal display screen is double the size of that on other Internet telephones and allows you to see graphics as well as text. It's due in stores by fall, at \$500 or so.

The Philips P200 also attracted plenty of attention, but mostly for its

looks. It is a standard screen phone that can send and receive E-mail and do banking on line. But it is more sculptured than the usual screen phones, with a fluid design. It will be released in May, with a list price of \$499.

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