3D: The panacea no one wants

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To paraphrase David Farragut, damn the sales figures, full speed ahead! If CES 2011 signaled anything, it was the industry's intent on shoving 3D down our throats. The most vocal proponent, Sony, claims they'll "lead the industry's charge for 3D." Yet for the industry, it's more like a holy crusade.

At CES 2010, we were force-fed all things 3D [1]: 3D TVs, 3D movies, 3D cameras, 3D projectors, 3D glasses, 3D laptops and more. This year was more of the same—3D, 3D, and more 3D. It's no coincidence that, by and large, CES 2011 was a huge let-down [2]; no major product launches, but lots and lots of 3D, the little technological wonder that no one wants. For the industry, 3D has become a figurative panacea, a cure-all, the solution to all our problems.

Sales of LCD and Plasma TVs were up 2.9 percent in 2010. But as the NY Times points out [3], that's "tiny compared with the gains of more than 20 percent in each of the prior three years." For most, 3D is not enticing enough to upgrade their "obsolete" LCD or Plasma HD TVs. CRT to flat screen was a dramatic leap. But for many, 3D is a cheap gimmick, not the holy grail of home entertainment. The industry begs to differ.

A DisplaySearch report recently conceded [4] "3D TV Not Growing as Fast as TV Makers Expected in 2010." This is the understatement of the century. DisplaySearch had previously forecasted that 3.4 million 3D TVs would ship in 2010. That's *ship*, mind you, not *sell*. It then adjusted that figure to 3.2 million. Accordingly, North American figures were lowered from 2 million to 1.6 million.

DisplaySearch predicts that 90 million 3D TVs, a nearly 3,000% increase, will ship by 2014. Why such an astronomical leap? Simple—the industry is shoving 3D down our throats. If every TV sold is 3D-ready, is that a true 100% adoption rate? Or is it adoption by Trojan Horse? A key indicator is the sale of 3D glasses—according to DisplaySearch, most countries have failed to achieve a 1:1 sales ratio between glasses and TVs.

Standard 3D displays work on the principle of stereoscopy, with alternating left and right images. Unfortunately, about 12% of people suffer from poor binocular vision [5], rendering them incapable of perceiving 3D images. That's strike one. Many

consumers report headaches and nausea [6] resulting from prolonged exposure to 3D content. Strike two. 3D active shutter glasses are expensive, there's a dearth of 3D content, and most 3D movies are post-converted garbage (see: Clash of the Titans, Alice in Wonderland, etc.). Strike three.

The future is autostereoscopy, or glasses-free 3D. Until now, this tech was limited to small form factor displays like Nintendo's forthcoming 3DS handheld [7]. But at CES 2011, a number of manufacturers boasted glasses-free 3D TV demos. Toshiba positively stole the show with their enormous 56 and 65-inch glasses-free 3D TVs [8]. The viewing angles are limited, and there's some flickering, but the tech works…sorta. The technology isn't quite ready for mass consumption, but that's the direction 3D is headed.

When politicians ignore their constituency, they get voted out. When companies ignore their customers, they go bankrupt. Inasmuch as consumers have responded negatively to 3D, the industry's stubborn push for it is baffling. The tech clearly shows promise, and I eagerly await viable glasses-free 3D TVs. But I'll refrain from being force-fed junk food.

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