

Consumer Electronics Show: Gone in a FLASH

by J. Miller/D.Waters [images by D. Massarik, P. Cremins]

THE WAR IS OVER

The battle ended before the combatants even took the field. Right out of the gate, or more accurately, before the mammoth 2008 Consumer Electronics Show got underway, a monumental battle ended. The Blu-ray versus HD DVD format war that promised to be the next VHS versus Betamax abruptly ended. And unlike the VHS-Beta battle, Sony came out on top in the Blu-ray war. On January 4, 2008, one day before CES opened for business, Barry Meyer, Chairman & CEO of Warner Brothers announced in a statement: "Warner Brothers move to exclusively release in the Blu-ray disc format is a strategic decision focused on the long term and the most direct way to give consumers what they want. The window of opportunity for high-definition DVD could be missed if format confusion continues to linger. We believe that exclusively distributing in Blu-



ray will further the potential for mass market success and ultimately benefit retailers, producers, and most importantly, consumers".

The announcement means Sony, Fox, Disney and Lionsgate all back Blu-ray (as well as Warner companies New Line and HBO---five of the seven biggest Hollywood studios now back the Blu-ray Disc format. Only Paramount / DreamWorks still support HD.



Hardware manufacturers backing Blu-ray Disc include Sony, Panasonic and Samsung, while HD DVD's main supporters have been Toshiba, Microsoft and Intel. Sony asserts that inclusion of Blu-ray Disc in the PlayStation 3 was an instrumental move in winning the fight for Blu-ray Disc and yet Samsung Electronics brought the Samsung BP-U5500 to CES, which supported Blu-ray and HD DVD playback in a single box.

The Warner announcement caused shockwaves through the industry. The HD DVD Promotion Group's CES had planned a splashy news conference-cocktail party gathering at the Las Vegas Wynn Hotel in addition to its display on the CS show floor. Within hours of the announcement, the group cancelled its scheduled news conference and all media interviews at CES.

Editor's Update: Feb 2008 - Toshiba announced discontinuation of its HD DVD businesses. Any remnants of the two-year war between HD DVD and Blu-ray officially ended as Toshiba waved the white flag and declared it would stop producing HD DVD products. According to Toshiba CEO Atsutoshi Nishida, "we decided it was not right for us to keep going with such a small presence". To date, Toshiba sold just over one million units worldwide.

CES 2008

Editor's Update: March 2008 - The HD DVD Promotion Group abruptly and officially dissolved.

Editor's Update: August 2008 - With the end of Toshiba HD-DVD manufacturing and the dissolution of the HD DVD Group, Blu-ray appeared the definitive winner in the format war and stands unopposed as the digital-optical media successor to the original DVD. At least that was the case until now. Toshiba worldwide announced its XDE (eXtended Detail Enhancement) DVD Player. The XDE player takes standard DVD image output and does 'upconversion' to improve it so it looks better on an HDTV set.

Ironically, the Blu-ray versus battle may not only turn out to be immaterial, but may soon be forgotten. Satellite and broadband providers at CES were showing Video on Demand (VoD) offerings that rival the Blu-ray image quality and offering industry statistics that VoD will become a relevant home DVD competitor in the next two to three years. With the advent of larger, bordering on monstrous flat panel screens for the home (such as this Panasonic 150"



plasma screen), the quality of the video feed/signal promises to be a crucial point.

While Intel may have been on the losing end of the Blu-ray versus HD-DVD fight, they showed no concern at CES. To the contrary, Intel wasn't showing but was willing to talk about their next big market

killer, which if delivered as promised will put Blu-ray disk out to pasture faster than Blu-ray dispatched HD-DVD.

Intel plans to move to the forefront of the flash memory/solid-state hard drive market.



Casual remarks by Intel representatives suggest that 'move to the forefront', means nothing less than CORNER the market. And the products they have may do just that. Intel's first entries into the flash-based hard drive market in 2007 were the usual 1GB, 2GB, 4GB and 8GB sizes that can be found virtually everywhere. What went little noticed of the Intel products were the sustained write speeds of 28MB per second, which is comparable to the mechanical hard drives.

Intel wouldn't display it, but acknowledged that they have a 64GB Solid-State SATA interface drive in testing that will be on sale in late 2008, and by 2009, 200GB and 300GB version will follow. The 64GB number is crucial as it surpasses the 50GB storage capacity of dual-layer disc Blu-ray disc.

Intel puts each device through substantial reliability testing and estimates the mean time before failure (MTBF) of the drives at approximately 5 million hours. Intel expects these new drives, with their ability to handle high workloads in less space, with no cooling requirements and lower power consumption to find their way into servers, desktops, laptops and notably DVR devices. The Blu-ray Disc Association may want to take note.