

What Happened In Vegas

If there wasn't much technology to die for on the CES floor, what does the future hold?

By Mike Rainone



"I still see myself as an aging geek."

This month, I attended the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) under duress. I knew that I was set to comment on the state of consumer electronics in this issue so, as much as I love to hate Las Vegas, I decided to pack my bags and get a look at the latest product offerings.

My aversion to the CES stems from an incident at the Apple booth years ago. It was the debut of Apple Newton, the Blackberry's predecessor. A young cutie asked if I would like to try a Newton and from that hand, I would've taken a handful of horse manure. I tried to type a message, but the device didn't recognize half of my letters.

My interaction with the handwriting algorithm was not going well. Cutie suggested tightening up my loose script, straightening my verticals and crisping my corners. I tried that with gusto under her watchful and somewhat suspicious eye. Sure enough, my efforts were pathetic.

I looked at her with the best puppy dog eyes I could manage and said, "This thing doesn't like me." As if dismissing a failed suitor, she replied, "Maybe you're just not an Apple Newton kind of person." That was the end of my aspirations to be a really cool Apple person and sadly, it was the last time I went to CES, until last month.

Trust me, I still see myself as an aging geek. I live for the neat new stuff you come across at CES, but I was anticipating the same generation gap I remembered from 10 years ago. You know, the one with the same condescending tone you hear from the twenty-something in your office when he demonstrates a feature on your cell phone that has left you clueless? It's the kind of experience that suggests you are so old, you may as well crawl into the casket and pull down the lid.

Obviously, I approached CES with great trepidation. I landed in Vegas and expected two things: confirmation that I was on edge of obsolescence, and evidence of the creeping decline of innovation. I couldn't have been more wrong.

While the white-hair crowd is not exactly a dominant presence at this show, the average age appeared to be mid-forties. The young geeks were transfixed by every imaginable manifestation of Guitar Hero as the rest of us were looking for business opportunities.

I'd forgotten that the heart of CES was about making money. From the pavilion featuring backseat boombox maniacs that rattle your vehicle at a spotlight to the well-funded home theater peddlers, most CES vendors are trying to figure out what they can sell. That endeavor is left to adults.

I'd love to report on an astounding new technology. Sorry to say, the interesting things at CES this year were products that we all knew were coming.

The concept of 3-D television is interesting, but without real standards there can't be much content, and therefore

not much traction. Shaking chairs for the 'ultimate home theater experience?' The idea may appeal to some, but I wonder how ultimate that experience really is when you have to pay for it?

I was intrigued by the brain exerciser software on display. If it does everything it claims, I'll be able to clean up my dementia, diabetes, gout and foul mood, all at the same time. It's too early to claim victory on those fronts though. I just didn't see much technology to die for on the floor. So that begs the question: What does the future hold?

I stayed in town for a briefing by the IEEE, Consumer Electronics Society which followed CES. I was hoping to hear the whisper of the next great thing. Not much there either, although the notion of a desk-top 2-Terabyte Drive was pretty astounding.


There was one hopeful note in this convention — the continuing evolution of metadata. As you probably know, metadata is intelligent software that can classify, catalog and otherwise deal with the massive amount of information we are now able to store. It is data about data.

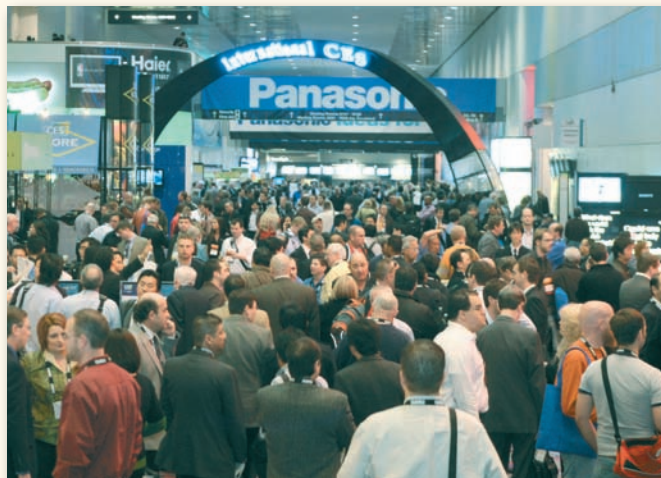
Current efforts focus on image processing, but the next generation technology will be able to analyze a photo or streaming video, recognize a child playing at home and catalog the picture under "child," "home," etc. It might even infer age, activity and location, once trained. Finding that photo will be as simple as asking the metadata search agent to find: Billy, 10, baseball, home, backyard.

This technology has huge implications for design engineers or anyone in the world of innovation. Think of the vast visual data in patent archives, vendors' archives, your company's archives and on the web. Imagine being able to quickly and efficiently search that vast database for visual data, drawings, video or photos. The ability to pose questions in the form of images or image fragments could greatly enhance engineering problem solving activities.

I anticipate a day when we will put on a visual imaging helmet and tactile, movement-sensing gloves and immerse ourselves in a shared 3-D world; connected to the world's informational resources and using our hands, voice, eyes, ears and brain to create the new products of the future.

Now that's something any generation could get excited about.

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Industry members, media and general attendees fill the aisles of the Central Hall at the 2009 International CES.