

InfoComm Asia

Andy Ciddor reports on the trends at InfoComm's first show in China.

IT'S ALREADY BECOMING difficult to remember that in late November of 2008, we still believed Australia wouldn't be affected by the global financial mess. In Hong Kong to attend InfoComm Asia, we saw China TV broadcasting news stories about how the disaster brought on by the unregulated western banks would have no impact on China's continuing growth. On the tradeshow floor the mood was definitely upbeat. Perhaps it was the noise from the busy Hong Kong streets below that masked the sound of the economic train wreck that was heading straight for us.

Buoyed by the world acclaim heaped on China for the recently completed Olympic and Paralympic Games spectacles, and encouraged by having the InfoComm showcase in their country for the first time, droves of Chinese companies were exhibiting, many for the very first time at such an international show.

Shenzhen Corp

With the technology powerhouse that is the city/region of Shenzhen in southern China being only a 35-minute suburban train ride away from Hong Kong island, there were many Shenzhen-based companies present. Technology innovators these folk may be, but they still need a bit of help with their image and marketing. No less than 13 of the exhibitors had company names beginning with the word Shenzhen. Let's face it: Norwood Plumbing, Collingwood Smash Repairs and Turrumurra Mowing may be names that help local businesses to build their trade, but the city of Shenzhen is hardly the first location that springs to mind when searching for a DVI splitter, a tubular screen motor, or a DLP display wall.

As to be expected at an AV show, there were countless gigantic screens: from Sharp's 108-inch LCD monster (that held the world LCD size record that week), to more LCD,

LED, and DLP display wall cubes than you could reasonably shake a stick at. Then there was the double-sided LCD signage panel and the unphotographable (due to moiré patterns) 2m-high LED signage column. Add to that a regiment of projection screens with bright projectors pointing at them and one could be forgiven for thinking that screens are all the AV industry is about.

Seeing it in 3D

Development in 3D displays has begun to pick up pace. Expect to come across more 3D in projects fairly soon, as the technologies become more available and marketing people begin to find vaguely plausible reasons for adopting them.

There were a slew of different 3D technologies on exhibit, some of them more prepared for real-world applications than others. Lenticular 3D displays, where the left and right images are displayed in alternating vertical stripes on the screen and are delivered to their target eye via an overlay of matching striped prisms on the screen, are getting bigger and brighter. While they may have the advantage of displaying 3D images without special goggles or glasses, lenticular displays only work well within a narrow range of viewing distances, so it will be interesting to see where this technology will go. Just for the hell of it, there was a lenticular display that showed three different 2D images, depending on your viewpoint. This may actually prove to be a more successful application for lenticular lenses over display panels.

There was a valiant, but not entirely successful, attempt at widescreen 3D using a multi-projector rig of edge-blended pairs of polarised projectors onto a curved screen. It's not clear whether the problem was the source material, the low brightness of the images, the edge blending processing or the ambient light on the screen, but it simply didn't

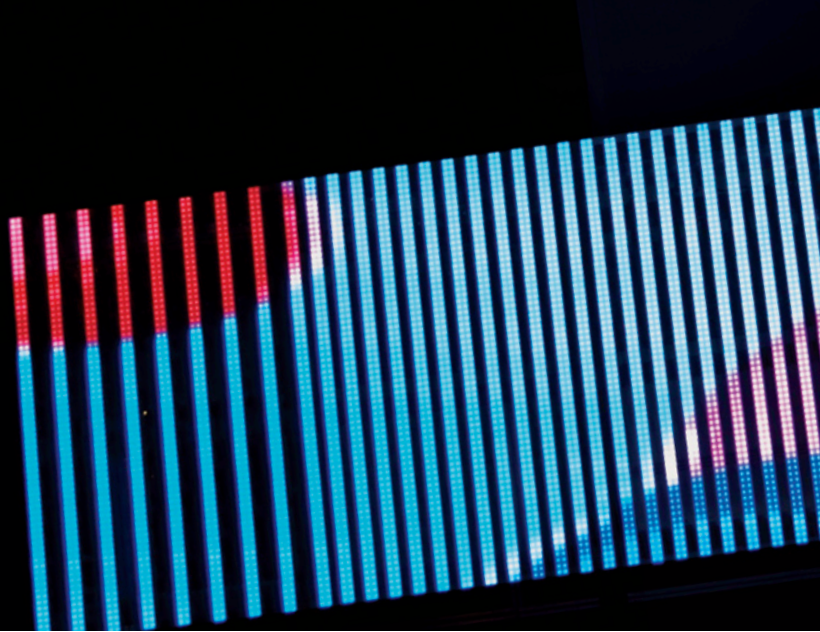
present a convincing 3D effect. No amount of adaptation time, squinting or cleaning the polarising glasses made the images converge.

Projected 3D, using alternating images from a single projector and LCD shutter glasses to route the images to the appropriate eye is one technology that seems to be getting cheaper, sharper and more comfortable by the week. The shutter glasses have been ready for a while, and now we're seeing some good projectors that can pump out sufficiently high-resolution images at sufficiently brisk frame rates to make the system workable.

The demos were mostly of CAD and similar visualisation applications, but with several companies now releasing production versions of the double frame rate projectors, things will begin to progress, and complementary 3D image acquisition systems must be the next step. A recent US demonstration narrowcast to theatres of a gridiron game in 3D HD was considered a success. The audiences loved it and various producers are seeing it as an opportunity, although almost every piece of equipment used was a desperate kludge. 3D is definitely on its way.

Digital Signage - Elephant in the Gloom

After working methodically through an area devoted to digital signage I was reminded of an ancient Indian story of a group of blind men who are taken to meet an elephant for the first time. Each approaches the elephant to feel it and decide upon the animal's nature. One feels the leg and declares that an elephant is like a pillar. Another feels the trunk and claims an elephant is like a tree branch. The next man feels the tail and believes an elephant is like a rope, the next feels an ear and likens the elephant to a fan. Similarly, the present state of the digital signage business means every company has touched a part of digital signage and decided what they've discovered is the entire digital signage business.



Olympics opening ceremony LED modules from the Leyard Electronic Technology Company.

So, we have screen manufacturers who bolt something akin to an embedded PC into their screens and throw in a piece of basic desktop scheduling software to create a 'digital signage system'. We have software companies that produce a desktop server that talks to clients that run on any .NET platform and drive a single dumb screen, thereby creating their 'digital signage system'. Then there are companies who have wireless client and server transceivers to connect to dumb screens, forming yet another 'digital signage system'. There's the very compact box that sits next to a dumb display and contains a complete embedded xnix-based composition, storage and scheduling system that can be managed via a web server interface.

Then there are software companies who have brilliant design and scheduling software with a library of hardware drivers sold as a 'digital signage system'. There was even a stand covered in swanky digital signage and graphics about their digital signage system (which made it stand out in this area), where none of the staff, who all spoke fluent English, had any clue as to which part of the puzzle their company actually supplied. Finally, there is a company that sells tickets to ride on the elephant even though they've never touched one – the software developer who perceives digital signage as yet another medium for displaying paid advertising, no different from the side of a building or the rear end of a taxi.

They are *all* correct about their part of the digital signage business, but nobody seems to have a clear overview. There certainly aren't any standards to allow the interchange of any elements in these systems, other than power leads and Ethernet cables.

When you stand back and struggle to get a sense of the whole elephant in the gathering gloom, it becomes apparent that the situation needs to change before digital signage can become an industry, rather than a collection of isolated clusters of innovation. ↩