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## Network Babel in the Living Room



By [Seán Captain](#) | Also by this reporter

Technology companies are touting 2006 as the year that networked home entertainment finally becomes a reality -- just as they have in years past.

The dream, as described at last week's Consumer Electronics Show, is to allow devices like TVs, computers and audio receivers to share audio and video around the home, with a single remote control running the show.

But where some see the industry awakening to a bright new future, others see an ongoing interoperability nightmare.

"The Japanese still do not understand networking," said one senior engineer employed by a major Japanese electronics maker, citing a litany of obstacles to digital nirvana -- from a lack of technology standards to tunnel vision exhibited by separate divisions within a single company.

At CES, tech heavyweights such as Intel, Panasonic, Samsung and Sharp all showed off networking systems, but none of those systems are designed to work together. The resulting problems are similar to miscommunication between people who speak the same language but different dialects -- sometimes they might understand each other perfectly well, but at other times they might not.

The biggest buzz comes from Intel, which last week [announced](#) a

technology platform called Viiv (rhymes with "jive"). Not surprisingly, Viiv makes a PC running a bundle of Intel chips and Microsoft's Windows Media Center operating system the brains of the home entertainment network. The PC needn't come as part of a traditional computer in a beige (or even black) box. For example, LG Electronics showed off a TV that had all the necessary gear packed inside.

Aside from LG, few big makers of home entertainment gear are excited about Viiv and the idea of putting a PC in charge of the living room entertainment system. [Panasonic](#), for example, instead sees a set-top cable box (which it happens to manufacture) as the center of home entertainment. It announced last week that it will be building a combination high-definition cable receiver and digital video recorder for Comcast that also has the ability to control TVs, audio receivers and DVD players over the A/V cables that connect them. Panasonic also spoke vaguely about ways to ship digital programs around the house over coaxial TV cables or in-wall power wires. None of this involves Intel. Paul Liao, chief technology officer of Panasonic North America, said the company has "no Viiv plans at the moment."

Sharp, meanwhile, thinks its Aquos brand of LCD TVs should be at the center. During last week's CES, Sharp [demonstrated](#) technology called Network Aquos that works with neither the Intel nor the Panasonic systems. Sharp isn't promising when its technology will arrive. "We're not quoting the time to market at this point. It's under development," said company representative Judah Zeigler.

There is some hope that home gadgets will one day work together. All the major computer- and living room-based entertainment companies are members of an association called the [Digital Living Network Alliance](#), or DLNA, which sets standards for how devices connect.

But the DLNA Certified stamp of approval only guarantees that devices will talk to each other, not that they will talk to humans in a way that makes sense. "Standards are necessary, but they are absolutely not sufficient," said Don MacDonald, vice president and general manager of Intel's digital home group, acknowledging that even his project requires a lot more work. "What we've done over the past few years is essentially

gotten ourselves to the beginning," he said.

MacDonald said that Intel has put a lot of work into setting standards for how devices act on a network, and that Viiv will have a certification program to ensure products work intuitively for users. Intel expects the first Viiv products other than PCs -- such as TVs and DVD players -- to appear in the later part of this year. But even if Viiv does work well, it will be useless if the big consumer electronics companies don't sign on.

Standards aren't the only problem. According to the anonymous engineer above, divisions within his own company can't agree on common specifications. Different teams are focusing on individual products and not considering how they can work together consistently, this person said.

For example, a program to display digital photographs might be called "photo viewer" in one device's menu and "image viewer" in another's.

"If I rotated a picture on my Blu-ray (DVD player), it wouldn't be rotated on my plasma," he continued, warning consumers of impending disappointments. "Just because the product they're buying says 'networking' or 'digital entertainment product' ... doesn't mean it is fulfilled in a similar manner -- even among products within the same brands."

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