

Tuesday, December 14, 2004

The Blu-ray in Tokyo

The Grand Hyatt's revolving doors have been replaced by sliding doors since my visit here in June . Indeed, I learn that all revolving doors in Japan are gone. The cause of the demise of Japanese revolving door was the tragic death of a 6 year old boy, an only child no less, in a revolving doors at the hyper modern Mori skyscraper last March. The Tokyo media quickly turned the death into a national scandal. In a symbolic gesture of atonement, Minoru Mori (who was blameless) resigned as CEO of the building company and, just as symbolically, suddenly all the revolving doors in Japan were locked shut as if some malicious child-killing spirit lurked inside them. Fearing a public outcry if they were reopened, buildings began replacing them with sliding doors. Aside from the expense involved, it was a technological step backwards.

The genius of revolving doors is that the outside and inside panels of the doors are never opened at the same time. So gust of winds can't gush into buildings and disrupt the air pressure. Sliding doors, on the other hand, allow the higher-pressure cold air to enter, create wind storms inside the building.

But Japanese technology was very much back on track when I later went to Sony headquarters in Shinagawa. I went there to interview its executives about their next generation DVD, the Blu-ray. Outwardly, the disc looks exactly like a conventional DVD— same circumference, same thickness, same silvery surface. The difference is that it holds 54 gigabytes of ones and zeroes, which more than five times as much as a conventional DVD— and when Sony adds another two paper-thin layers next year, it will hold 100 gigabytes or ten times as much data. This quantum leap proceeds from substituting a blue for a red laser in the player. Since the blue laser has a much shorter wave length and beam spot than the red laser, the information can be more densely packed on a DVD's surface. But the real issue here is not technology but purpose.

At its most discussed-- albeit least interesting-- level, the increase in storage capacity will allow movie companies to reissue their old movies in the high-definition(HD) format, which has far superior picture quality to conventional DVDs. To this end, Sony has teamed up with Disney and Fox to release movies for the Blu-ray . Sony is not alone in this business. Its arch rival Toshiba has also announced a new format called HD-DVD . Both the Sony and Toshiba devices use blue lasers and both have the minimum capacity (15 gigabytes) for a HD movie. The Toshiba format requires less costly changes for DVD manufacturers than the Sony format--but the Sony format can store about 50 percent more data.

Sony will move ahead with the Blu-ray, no matter what the cost of competing formats, because it needs the Blu-ray's additional storage to realize the grand strategy of its chairman, Nobuyuki Idei: transforming Sony from a hardware-based company (like Toshiba) to a software-based company. To do this, Sony needs a disc which has room for consumers to continually add material to their DVDs from Sony's Internet web site.

The big market here would be games— which is far more profitable than movies for Sony. With the Blu-ray, A teenage boy could stop a movie in the midst of an exciting car chase in a movie and instantly download and record a game based on it on the same DVD.

The crucial element in this strategy, which is to be unveiled at the Los Angeles E3 show this May, is the Playstation-3. The P-3, as Sony executives call the new console, is anything but a child's plaything. It is based on a new chip set called "grid," which will deliver more teraflops of processing power than the famous IBM Deep Blue supercomputer. At its heart is— you guessed it— the Blu-ray laser, with its ability instantaneously acquire from the Internet games, movies, HDTV and other digital products and add them to 50 to 100 gigabyte discs. By the time I left Sony headquarters, I was convinced that the Blu-ray is an indispensable part of Sony's plan to move its software from cyber space.

I ended the evening at site of the famous revolving door accident, the Mori building. On its 51st floor is Mr. Mori's marvelous Roponggi Hills Club. It has three kitchens— Japanese, Californian, and Chinese. I had been graciously invited for dinner there by Sophie de Talliac and her husband Riku Suzuki. Both the view of Tokyo from this vantage point— and company— was spectacular and enchanting.

posted by Edward Jay Epstein at [1:45 AM](#)

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I studied government at Cornell and Harvard, and received a Ph.D from Harvard in 1973. My master's thesis on the search for political truth (Inquest: The Warren Commission and the Establishment of Truth and my doctoral dissertation (News From Nowhere) were both published as books. I taught political science at MIT and UCLA for three years but then decided that researching and writing books was a far more educational enterprise. The Big Picture: The New Logic of Money and Power in Hollywood is my thirteenth book. I am currently researching a book on the 9-11 Commission. I live in New York City.