

Home Entertainment: Sights, Sounds, and Total Immersion

What's *great* about going to the movies? It's immersive. A movie theater sets aside a time and place for an experience that, at its best, removes us from this world and places us in another that demands our total attention. They displace us in the best possible way. It's a way of sharing public space that feels at once communal and private. Movies are shared, yet intensely subjective, experiences that affirm not only our beliefs about ourselves, but about our values as a culture. They offer us respite and escape without leaving us hungover. In an age where connectivity is urgent and all-consuming, movies provide the only place and place where I can completely ignore my cell phone and not feel as though I owe it to the world to answer its every message. Maybe it's just me--and I doubt that it is, given the number of people who still violate the sanctity and sanctuary of a dark theater with their phones--but I don't even get that kind of freedom when I sleep. When I leave a movie, my head is always swimming with ideas, overflowing with imaginings of the *possible* that I just don't get from watching television. At its core, home entertainment aspires to the level of cinema.

Home Theaters

A home theater should enhance the immersive, experiential totality of a movie by grafting it onto the comfort and privacy of one's own space. All of the things that can detract from the enjoyment of a movie in a theatre--the hassle of parking, the absurd prices at the concession stand, the crowds and the lines--are eliminated in a home theatre. The communal aspect isn't eliminated, it's localized to the familiar, focused on those we trust into our homes. The home theater can also be a place for purely selfish modes of recreation: a socially acceptable way to get lost, to turn inwards, to reflect on beauty and heroism or human folly and tragedy through the medium of film.

The primary components of a good home entertainment system are video and audio: the television and the stereo system.

The Silver Screen in Your Living Room

The only two types of television you should be considering for a home entertainment system are LED-LCD or plasma displays. Most buyer's guides like to give extraordinarily long explanations of how the technology works and what the difference is, but that's not actionable information. What the average buyer needs to know is this: plasma televisions offer better picture, smoother motion resolution, significantly higher contrast and deeper black levels, and can be viewed from any angle without distortion or frame loss. They're excellent for watching in dim conditions. They're also heavier and consume more power than LED-LCD displays. LED-LCDs are better for rooms that are brightly lit or daytime viewing with open blinds: any condition where you're watching in a lit room. The picture on an LED-LCD, however, is only good when viewed straight on. Any variation in angle results in color shift and inconsistent picture quality: this is a problem if other people are sitting off to the side and watching. A plasma TV gives a better picture overall. You'll want a TV with enough HDMI inputs to see to whatever

devices you plan on plugging in. Most good TVs come with four. You may be wondering about Ultra HD or 4K TV. Yes, they're very high-resolution. However, very little is being broadcast in UHD and although some companies are remastering movies in this format, it seems unlikely at this time that it will catch on in North America. Besides that, you'll get plenty of resolution from a plasma or LED-LCD.

Speakers/Sound

When it comes to getting the sound quality to go with your TV, you have two real choices: a sound bar or a receiver and speakers. The speakers on your TV are going to be small and won't offer the kind of output that you'll get from an independent sound source. A sound bar is going to be less expensive than an AV receiver/speaker system. You'll want one with a separate remote. Be sure to position it so it doesn't block the remote sensor on your TV or you'll be standing up every time you want to change a channel or make an adjustment. Take measurements if necessary.

If you're going the route of a more traditional system, you might consider a simple stereo set up consisting of two tower speakers and an AV receiver. This provides ample sound coverage for movies and television. If you're looking for a more immersive experience or if you're a gamer, a five or six speaker surround sound system is the way to go. If you're on a budget, you'll want to get three speakers for the center, left, and right of the front of the room. Add a subwoofer for bass later. Your receiver should have multiple HDMI inputs and offer at least 100 watts per channel: that should be adequate for most sound systems. It should support Dolby Digital. Audio is a good place to put your money: the technology doesn't evolve as exponentially or as rapidly as video.

A few final things before you start taking down the family pictures to make room for the new TV:

Home Theaters in a box: Avoid them. Cheap components. Not worth it.

Expensive HDMI cables: you're not going to notice the difference in resolution or audio quality. Get sturdy cables, but save your money and ignore the gold-plated things the clerk is pushing.

3D. If you're going with 3D systems, get a plasma system with active 3D. The passive 3D systems are low-resolution.

The Refresh Rate: Don't worry about it. You won't have to with a plasma anyway.

While we don't have any advice on popcorn, you can probably figure that out for yourself.