

GROUP TEST

Panasonic TH-50PHW6

Although seasoned pros, the excitement in the office of receiving a 50in plasma still makes us glow with anticipation. The high-definition compatible resolution of 1366 x 768 (compared with the previous 852 x 480) had us excited before we even saw it in action.

Around the back things are less impressive. The limited connections include a 15-pin PC slot and an RS-232 control jack, and there are no speakers. This may be fair considering the system that deserves to accompany a display of this calibre, but no component connection? Have we missed something? Apparently not, Panasonic has adopted the upgrade route preferred by manufacturers like Loewe. Under the securely screwed covers there's three connection bays, one of which is for the Scart terminal included in the box. £450 may seem a lot to pay for the TU-PT600B tuner/receiver box, but it's the best option and offers more AV inputs than the screen can deliver, and can be easily connected via a single cable.



Performance

In addition to the usual sharpness, contrast and brightness adjustments and presets, there's the added bonus of some rather unique flexible black extension circuitry, individual adjustment of the white balances for high and low red and blue saturations, and both manual and automatic gamma adjustments. Speakers are available as an optional extra and offer a pseudo surround mode.

So much for what's available, how does the TV actually fare as a display? Thankfully, the results are absolutely brilliant, all but for a small caveat. With the resolution upscaled to fit the display, we found results from standard inputs to be less impressive than the same feeds to its smaller brother. Scaling standard definition broadcasts and DVDs to larger sizes obviously emphasises the artefacts or blemishes even from the finest quality sources. Mapping RGB feeds to such a high resolution is unfortunately a fault Panasonic can do nothing about until we start receiving HDTV in this country. Detail boosting circuitry may well go some way to improve this, but the picture still looks superb.

It's with the high definition feeds (provided by our in-house tech labs) that the Panasonic truly came into its own. Particularly of note is the contrast ratio – it's hard to remember when blacks have looked blacker, while rendition of colours and a total lack of noise are pulled off with similar effortlessness. With *Kill Bill* fed into the set via a PAL Progressive feed, Uma Thurman's yellow-suited swordswoman cut through the yakuza with beautiful clarity – with animated action being handled as well as the live action stunts. Therefore, to create a perfect system, we recommend making the extra investment of a separate scaler to enhance image quality from Freeview and Sky.

In conclusion, of the set as a whole we were impressed to the point of embarrassment for how the competition is going to struggle to try and keep up with this stunning Panasonic plasma. **WP**

THE FLAT FACTS

- 50IN 16:9 PLASMA
- £5,600
- RESOLUTION 1,366 x 768
- DIMENSIONS W: 1,210 H: 724 D: 98 (mm)
- SPEAKERS: NO
- TV TUNER: NO
- SCARTS: 1 (RGB)

RATINGS

- FOR** Picture fidelity; price; high definition compatibility
- AGAINST** Standard connectivity is basic; some hi-def source artefacts
- PICTURE ...★★★★★
- SOUND ...N/A
- LOOKS ...★★★★☆
- FEATURES ...★★★★★
- EASE OF USE ...★★★★★
- VALUE ...★★★★★

VERDICT ★★★★★
Pure performance, consider the upgrade to get the very best

THE FLAT FACTS

- 46IN 16:9 PLASMA
- £2,800
- RESOLUTION 852 x 480
- DIMENSIONS W: 1,138 H: 69 D: 98 (mm)
- SPEAKERS: YES
- TV TUNER: NO
- SCARTS: NONE

RATINGS

FOR An affordable price tag; neat user interface

AGAINST Colour banding spoils everything

- PICTURE ...★★☆☆☆
- SOUND ...★★★★☆
- LOOKS ...★★★★☆
- FEATURES ...★★★★★
- EASE OF USE ...★★★★★
- VALUE ...★★★★★

VERDICT ★★★★★
Flawed pictures are the ultimate undoing of an otherwise nicely priced screen

BenQ PDP46W1

Little-known Taiwanese company BenQ's debut plasma is something of a rarity, in that it boasts a 46in screen as opposed to the more common 42in or 50in.

A healthy array of socketry is on offer, fitted as modules. Our sample had the Video and PC modules fitted, providing component, composite and S-video inputs, two pairs of stereo audio inputs plus D-Sub RGB and DVI inputs (but sadly no Scarts). It lacks a tuner, so RF sockets are nowhere to be seen. Also available is an enhanced PC module, that offers five BNC sockets (for RGB, plus the horizontal and vertical sync signals), three extra D-Sub ports and a PC audio minijack.

Speakers are built into the set but these only offer a measly 2W of audio power. External speakers can be bought separately for £200. When it comes to the feature count, options are somewhat limited to say the least. There are no picture presets to speak of, besides Warm and Cool temperature settings. Sound-wise, the only noteworthy feature is the SRS WOW stereo widener.

Performance

Unfortunately, the PDP46W1 is a huge disappointment in the picture department. Rigged up to a PAL progressive scan-capable DVD player, the image suffers from excessive colour banding. It has difficulty reproducing the transition between colour tones, causing backgrounds to look blocky and jagged. This creeps around the picture like an eerie, malevolent mist, making everything look messy. It gets worse during night scenes, where the darkness accentuates these nasty artefacts.

It's not helped by a lack of contrast, with a ratio quoted at a low 850:1. Images are pale and it's hard to pick out different shades in gloomy scenes. Blacks have a green tinge and lack depth and richness.



As a result of these problems, the purity and vibrancy of colours are hugely compromised. No amount of picture tweaking is able to bring them to life. Are there any redeeming factors? Just one. It's clear that the PDP46W1 has a natural talent for detail reproduction, as a spin with our high-definition (1080i) D-VHS player demonstrates.

Also, the speakers are horribly tinny and without speaker grilles, the sound has to escape through the ventilation holes at the back. Our advice? Make sure you use a half decent external sound system!

It might have a very tempting price, but the PDP46W1 fails to deliver the goods where it really matters. Its pictures are substandard and everything else smacks of mediocrity. It's easy to use but that alone isn't enough to merit our recommendation. **WP**

WhatPlasma						
MAKE MODEL:	Fujitsu P50XHA10ES	LG MZ-60PZ10	Panasonic TH-50PHW5	Pioneer PDP-504HDE	Panasonic TH-50PHW6	BenQ PDP46W1
SPECIFICATIONS						
Screen size:	50in	60in	50in	50in	50in	46in
Resolution:	1,366 x 768	1,280 x 720	1,366 x 768	1,024 x 768	1,366 x 768	852 x 480
Dimensions (w x h x d):	1,214 x 728 x 98mm	1,454 x 883 x 99mm	1,210 x 724 x 98mm	1,270 x 737 x 98mm	1,210 x 724 x 98mm	1,138 x 69 x 98mm
Speakers:	Optional	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
TV Tuner:	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
Price:	£6,350	£1,300	£7,600	£6,500	£5,600	£2,800
Tel:	020 8731 3450	01753 491 500	0870 535 357	01753 789 500	08705 357 357	0161 763 3633
Web:	www.fujitsu-general.co.uk	www.lge.co.uk	www.panasonic.co.uk	www.pioneer.co.uk	www.panasonic.co.uk	www.aone.co.uk
FEATURES						
Contrast ratio:	3,000:1	600:1	3000:1	1,100:1	4,000:1	850:1
Brightness ratio:	1,000cd/m2	620cd/m2	500cd/m2	1,000cd/m2	TBC	300cd/m2
Progressive scan compatible:	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
High definition compatible:	TBC	Yes	Yes	TBC	Yes	Yes
CONNECTIONS						
Scarts	1 (RGB)	None	3(2 RGB)	1 (RGB)	1 (RGB)	None
HDMI input:	No	No	No	Yes	No	No
DVI-D input:	Yes	No	No	No	No	No
D-Sub input:	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
VERDICT						
Picture:	★★★★☆	★★★★☆☆	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★☆☆☆☆
Sound:	★★★★☆	N/A	N/A	★★★★★	N/A	★★☆☆☆☆
Looks:	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★★☆☆
Features:	★★★★☆	★★★★☆☆	★★★★☆☆	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★☆☆
Ease of use:	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★☆☆
Value:	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★☆☆
OVERALL	★★★★☆	★★★★☆☆	★★★★☆☆	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★☆☆

And the winner is... Pioneer PDP-504HDE

As always choosing a winner from this selection of larger than life screens was about as difficult as choosing which beer to start the evening with; you know that essentially they're all pretty good, but the real art comes in finding the best one to suit you. Perhaps before we get too wrapped up in why Pioneer's PDP-504HDE is the Stella Artois, er, sorry the cream of the crop, let's look at why the others missed out.

Despite the fact that the P50XHA10ES is without doubt a step in the right direction, faint traces of colour branding and evidence of motion trails proved to be the 50in set's achilles' heel. It may be true that switching to Fine mode reduces these nasty side-effects, but they left the image so insipid that it's unwatchable in anything other than a pitch black viewing room.

Next up was the big screen offering from LG. Without doubt this set is fantastic value for money, but lacking speakers, a tuner and a multitude of connections, it always had the odds stacked against it.

Closer competition came in the form of the Panasonic twins, as we fondly like to refer to them. The TH-50PHW5 and 6 respectively. Both of these screens had plenty in their favour and you can pretty much

guarantee that should you make the hefty investment, you will not be disappointed. Ultimately, though it was a case of the 5 proving to be practically useless without a media box and the 6 just plain disappointing with DVD.

Lastly, we came to the rookie of the plasma world BenQ's PDP46W1. Until recently, the Taiwanese brand has tended to concentrate its efforts on the PC world, but having recently taken over a lot of Philips' manufacturing the company is looking to move into the AV arena. Judging by this performance it will be made most welcome. Although the image on this 46in stunner suffered from occasional colour banding, the price tag and intuitive user interface make it a pretty enticing offer nonetheless.

So why did the PDP-504HDE come out on top? Quite simply a combination of stunning design, a breath-taking performance, all the connectivity you could ask for and a great user system certainly all played their part. Ultimately, though this set won the day because it is quite simply one of the most impressive large screens we've ever seen, and we LOVE it.

