

productreview

Pioneer PDP-4360HD Plasma Display System



I down-shift to third gear as my car slices through turn two of the Mazda Laguna Seca Raceway. Those suspension upgrades I installed just before this race seem to be paying off quite nicely. Ahead of second place, I check my mirror frequently. And then the unthinkable happens. Going into turn nine with too much speed, my car fails to negotiate the corner and ends up on the grass. My heart is racing and my hands are sweating. Suddenly, I wake up! Perhaps I played a little too much Forza Motorsport last night on the new Pioneer plasma that I was asked to review.

The great news about plasma televisions these days is that every new generation offers better performance, packs more features and costs less than the previous generation. This sixth generation Pioneer plasma promises a brighter display, with deeper black levels and more accurate colours than the previous generations. The 43-inch PDP-4360HD is appropriately called a plasma display system, not just

a plasma display. Unlike a plasma television that comes in a single, large box, this system can be comprised of up to four components. The PDP-4360HD is actually made up of two pieces: the PDP-436PU plasma display and the PDP-R06U media receiver. On top of these, there are two more optional accessories that can complement the plasma: a table top stand and screen-mounted speakers. What is the purpose of the media receiver you ask? Good question. The media receiver houses dual NTSC tuners (standard TV) together with a single ATSC tuner (high-definition TV). It connects to the display panel using a single proprietary digital interface cable. All of your audio/video components connect to the media receiver. As a result, the plasma panel is slimmer than a typical plasma television and the number of cables between the equipment rack and the display is minimized. This is especially true if you connect most of your video sources directly to the display. Although in my set up, where video

switching is performed by the receiver, all of the video sources are fed to the receiver and only a single component cable would normally run to the display. So in my case, the separate display/media receiver configuration didn't really make the setup any easier. If you were to mount this plasma display on a wall, then this configuration would make your life easier. Pioneer is not the only manufacturer to provide separate media receivers with their displays.

The Pioneer plasma panel looks simple yet well-dressed with its glossy black frame and silver stand. I must say that I do favor the simple black frame design over other more fancy designs. It truly focuses the attention of the viewer on the screen, instead of dispersing it to the edges which fancier designs seem to do. It also enhances the perceived brightness and contrast of the images on the screen. The media receiver is split horizontally with the top section finished in black and the bottom in silver. It has a simple, ele-

gant look that's free of buttons with the exception of a power button. The silver section of its face is actually a flap that opens to reveal TV Guide buttons, a VGA input and a component/S-video/composite input. The TV Guide On Screen system is a free on-screen television programming guide, similar to the guides that come with digital cable and satellite receivers. It offers program listings (for up to eight days), searching by keyword/channel/genre, timer recording, reminders and more. It can also be set up with your DVD recorder to allow for easier program recording.

The PDP-436PU plasma display offers an XGA resolution of 1024 by 768 pixels, a brightness of 1100 cd/m² and a contrast of 3000:1. The media receiver has 3 component/3 S-video/3 composite, 2 HDMI, 1 VGA and 2 i.LINK (FireWire) inputs. It also has 2 antenna connectors: one for analog/digital cable and one for an indoor/outdoor antenna. A CableCARD interface is also present. The i.LINK interface can be used with i.LINK D-VHS

recorders only (with this plasma system).

The Pioneer comes with a universal, learning remote that is fully backlit. It is longer than typical remotes so you will have to slide your hand up and down on it but the buttons are well laid out, making it easy to use. A direct input source button is provided for each TV and video source so you don't have to cycle through inputs when switching sources - this is a great feature that every remote should have. On top of all this, there are four favorite channel buttons that can be programmed with the TV Guide On Screen - a small but appreciated feature.

I set up the Pioneer PDP-4360HD display system with our Marantz SR8500 receiver which performed the audio and video switching for me. Four different sources provided the signals: an analog television cable, a Motorola DSR505 HD satellite receiver (high definition feed), a Pioneer DV-563A DVD player and an Xbox 360 (also high definition). All video connections were made using component cables.

With factory settings, the picture on the PDP-4360HD looked great. The colours looked realistic and the contrast was impressive. The first big test for a large screen television set is how it handles low quality analog signals because after all, a lot of us don't have digital or high definition signals yet. Many people bring large screen televisions home only to disappoint themselves with just how bad regular cable looks on them (after seeing higher quality signals at the store). But the Pioneer did not disappoint here. Analog signals were completely acceptable when blown up to the size of this 43-inch panel. It did a better job than many same-sized plasmas that I've seen.

At this point, I decided to tweak the factory settings using the Digital Video Essentials DVD. The video test patterns on this disc suggested that the colour should be turned up, the tint should lean a little towards the green and the sharpness should be turned down. The brightness and contrast remained pretty much in their original positions. The Pioneer remem-



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bers the settings for each of its video inputs.

While watching digital television from my satellite box, I noticed that the picture was slightly on the dark side and that it was now too soft for my preference. Turning the brightness and sharpness up a little did the trick. The colours now appeared more alive and vibrant but very natural at the same time without their original slight bias towards red.

Now, I was ready to get into some extended watching. The 480p signal from my satellite receiver looked substantially better than the analog signal on the PDP-4360HD and reasonably so. I caught a few channels playing the same program which made it an easy comparison. Again, I was happy with the job this plasma did with the lower quality signal.

Next, I moved on to watching a few DVDs. The colours in the opening chapters of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* were well saturated and clean. The skin tones of the characters looked realistic, although the grass appeared a little too vibrant. The PDP-4360HD performed great with darker scenes and varying shades of gray. The dark scenes produced a deep black level. Subtle shading in the dual-personality captain's black coat was clearly visible. The preset Movie mode (a little biased towards red) worked well with low light in the room but was a little too dark to watch under daylight conditions. With daylight in the room, I preferred to watch the plasma in the Standard, Dynamic or User modes.

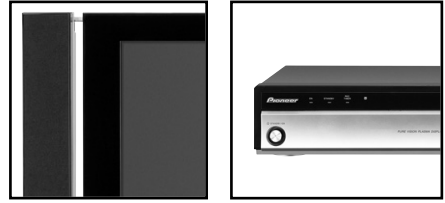
The media receiver has a fan that spins at different speeds. At lower speeds, the fan can't be heard over the audio, however when the fan spins faster it can be heard over low volume levels. I also noticed that the fan in the media receiver runs in the low setting almost 24/7 when the television is in the stand-by mode. Updates to the TV Guide On Screen are sent at various times during the night which requires the media receiver to remain in an

"always on" state.

The Pioneer did a spectacular job with signals from the Xbox 360. The set features a preset picture mode for playing video games to reduce the risk of a burn-in of static images from games. This "Game" mode tones the brightness down and works perfectly fine in dimmer lighting conditions, although in daylight conditions this mode makes the picture a little difficult to view. The manual recommends limiting video gaming on this television to two hours at a time and then watching a normal moving picture for over three times as long before playing games again. Again, this is to prevent the risk of a burn-in.

Finally, I put the PDP-4360HD to the test with high-definition programming. I should mention that when switching between component and DVI video inputs, the Pioneer tells you exactly what signal it is picking up, whether it's 480p, 720p or 1080i - a very useful feature. Now, the Pioneer showed me what it truly does best. DVDs looked very much alive on this plasma set but sporting events, movies and episodes of *CSI* came through in a whole new light in high-definition. The detail and sharpness of the picture was incredible. Names on baseball player uniforms were crisp enough that I could read them, even in long shots. When watching movies, imperfections in every character's skin were clearly visible.

The Pioneer PDP-4360HD produced one of the best pictures that I have seen yet. It excels in colour reproduction, processing and delivers an impressive black level. If you're looking to raise your home theatre performance to a new level, you should definitely give this Pioneer a try. With a price tag of \$4499 (plus \$399 for the table-top stand) it is worth every penny. A good number of dealers have this television set up in their showrooms, so you should be able to bring some DVDs and see for yourself how it performs.



specifications

Manufacturer:

Pioneer Electronics Inc.
www.pioneerpurevision.com
www.pioneerelectronics.ca
905-479-4411

Price (MSRP):

\$4499.00

Pioneer PDP-4360HD Plasma Display System

- Screen size: 43 inches
- Ratio: 16:9
- Resolution: 1024 x 768 pixels
- Brightness: 1100 cd/m2
- Contrast: 3000:1
- Tuners: Dual NTSC tuners and ATSC tuner / Digital Cable Ready (DCR) with Cable CARD interface
- TV Guide On Screen Interactive Program
- Split Screen / Picture in Picture
- Inputs: antenna F connections x 2 (1 digital/1 analog), HDMI with HDCP x 2, component video x 3, S-Video x 3, composite x 3, I.Link x 2, D-Sub for PC x 1, SR In x 1
- Outputs: optical audio output x 1, subwoofer output x 1, monitor output (composite) x 1, SR + output x 1
- 2-way stereo speakers: optional
- Backlit universal remote control
- Display dimensions (WxHxD): 42.4 x 24.9 x 3.6 inches
- Display Weight: 56.9 lbs
- Receiver dimensions (WxHxD): 16-9/16 x 3-9/16 x 11-13/16 inches
- Receiver Weight: 9.9 lbs

