WHY play games on a miserable 21in LCD monitor when you can cover the whole wall with your favourite titles? Data projectors aimed at high-definition television enthusiasts are well suited to gamers, thanks to their high resolution. The Panasonic AE-700 is a much-anticipated model among projector enthusiasts. It combines a native resolution of 1280 by 720 pixels with high-contrast, low-fan noise and clever design to create a package that has many home cinema geeks excited.

Using a home cinema display device instead of a computer monitor for gaming has traditionally limited the amount of graphical detail, since maximum resolutions are typically far lower – often less than the bare games minimum of 800 by 600.

At 1280 by 720, however, gamers can enjoy a widescreen image equivalent to 1024 by 768 resolution on a computer monitor. It's not the highest resolution (1600 by 1200 is the top) but when the image is more than two metres wide, who cares?

The AE-700 is designed to make installation as flexible as possible. The front exhaust means the unit won't overheat if placed in a bookcase.

The exhaust grille diverts hot air away from the projector at a 45 degree angle so it won't drift in front of the lens and cause the image to ripple.

Less expensive projectors often exhibit a screen-door effect, as the image appears to be viewed through a fine mesh due to space between the pixels.

At 1280 by 720, screen-door effect is already reduced, but Panasonic includes its smooth-screen technology to further reduce pixelation and pixel artefacts.

It's not perfect, but you do need to get very close to see the pixels.

Some projectors display vertical bands of brighter and dimmer colour due to the way the LCD is designed.

The AE-700 displays little of this banding, although very sensitive viewers may be able to see it sometimes, depending on what is being projected.

For options, the only real blow to gamers in the AE-700 is the lack of digital DVI input. Operating on the analogue SVGA port the projector does not perform at its best, since analogue-to-digital conversion reduces image crispness.
Instead of a DVI port, the AE-700 has HDMI, a newer standard designed to work with the next generation of HDTVs and DVD players.

Fortunately, DVI-to-HDMI cables are available, although you may need to order one from overseas. Try www.extending.com.tw/hdmi.htm

The AE-700 is mainly designed for HDTV and progressive-scan DVD players, and while viewing movies and even normal digital television, the projector produced excellent images.

Most significantly, while less expensive projectors tend to display black as a muddy grey, the AE-700 has excellent contrast, with black areas putting out almost no light at all – a big improvement over earlier models.

Since the AE-700 is a widescreen projector, setting it up for games is a bit of a fiddle. Windows can display the desktop in 1280 by 720 so web-browsing and playing movies from the PC is no problem at all.

Most games are still locked to a 4:3 aspect ratio, so it's a matter of choice whether you stretch the image, lock the projector to 4:3 or use its Just (justify) setting.

That only stretches the edges of the image, leaving the centre (where all the action is) undistorted.

PlayStation 2 and Xbox work without problems, especially with games that support widescreen.

Playing games on a data projector is still a pioneering activity, but the AE-700 is an excellent step towards a big-screen future.

**SPECIFICATIONS**

- **Resolution:** 1280 by 720
- **Ideal image size:** 280cm
- **Lamp life:** 3000 hours
- **PRICE:** $3899

**VERDICT**

**PROS:** Excellent image quality, no screen-door effect, minimal pixelation, front exhaust, high contrast.

**CONS:** Expensive, needs HDTV to really shine, no DVI-in.

**Rating:** 4.5/5

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