

3D gets close enough to touch

January 6 2010, By Edward C. Baig

The flat, familiar, two-dimensional television image at the center of your home theater is about to take on the lifelike illusion of depth. At least that's the way the future looks through the spectacles of Hollywood studios, TV networks and consumer electronics manufacturers as they prepare to launch a massive effort to bring 3D from the silver screen into your living room.

"2010 will be the year in which 3D is brought to the home," DreamWorks Animation CEO Jeffrey Katzenberg says. He's so bullish on the technology that he's committed his studio to make 3D versions of all of its future movies.

Now there's a stampede to 3D TV. Vizio just announced a 47-inch 3D-capable set for \$1,999. Consumers will spend \$17 billion on 3D TVs in 2018, research company DisplaySearch forecasts. And manufacturers -- and entertainment producers -- are scrambling to tie themselves to the technology as it takes center stage at the massive [Consumer Electronics Show](#), which opens here Thursday.

Discovery, Sony and Imax said Tuesday that they'll jointly create the first full-time 3D cable channel, which could be available as early as the end of this year.

It initially will be heavy with science and nature programs from Discovery and Imax. The mix will change as the partners produce, and license, 3D versions of general entertainment movies and shows.

"Two years ago, people were still saying that 3D (TV) probably won't work," says Sony CEO Howard Stringer. "The momentum of 3D in the last six months alone has been quite striking. And even though there are not hundreds of movies (in 3D), there's a kind of rolling rhythm to this. The more success we have, the easier it is for us to upgrade movies to 3D, and there are events that can be exciting, like 3D concerts and video games."

This week, ESPN announced plans to launch an all-sports 3D network on June 11, starting with World Cup soccer and eventually including the Summer X Games (extreme sports) and college basketball and college football. ESPN 3D will have at least 85 live 3D sporting events, the Disney-owned network promises.

Billionaire Mark Cuban says his cable channel HDNet will soon shoot most of its prime-time and weekend shows in 3D. The top-quality versions will initially appear on cable and satellite on-demand services.

"We hope to really grow this part of our business," Cuban told USA Today in an e-mail. "There won't be a ton of 3D ready sets out for a while, but that's OK. As we grow our content base, the market will come to us."

Cuban is also owner of the NBA's Dallas Mavericks. Some NBA games will appear on the new ESPN 3D channel.

The NFL is also experimenting with 3D. The Dallas Cowboys issued 80,000 pairs of 3D glasses at a home game this season so fans could watch a few plays on a 72-foot-high Mitsubishi video board.

The push for 3D in the home goes beyond TV. Acer and Asus have unveiled computers that display 3D. There's broad interest in 3D video games.

"Everybody is excited about the potential of moving 3D onto virtually every platform that has video in it," Katzenberg says.

You'll need a brand new TV, though, to watch shows in 3D. Cable, satellite and phone company TV customers also may need a new set-top box.

Panasonic, Sony, Samsung, Mitsubishi, Vizio and LG are among the manufacturers poised to unveil 3D-capable televisions and Blu-ray players this week at CES.

Some analysts say the new sets will be a hit. By 2014, 45 percent of all U.S. households will have a TV that can handle 3D, up from just 3 percent this year, research company Futuresource Consulting forecasts.

The Consumer Electronics Association estimates that nearly 2.2 million 3D TVs will be sold this year.

Following the migration from black-and-white to color, and analog to digital high definition, "3D is the final frontier for television," says Panasonic Vice President Bob Perry.

For now the various 3D technologies all involve wearing glasses. You're typically watching two separate images; the technology tricks your eyes into seeing depth. Efforts are underway to permit you to watch 3D without glasses, but it'll likely take years before the technology is ready for prime time.

With profit margins that are thinner than a flat screen, it's no wonder TV manufacturers are banking on 3D as a way to get consumers to open their wallets. Still, it may be difficult to persuade people to embrace 3D. The critical challenges include:

- Selling the technology.

Many consumers only recently bought a new HDTV and Blu-ray player. So they might not be exactly thrilled about replacing those models so soon, especially if it costs a lot to do so.

In-Stat analyst Michelle Abraham found that 25 percent of consumers would not pay extra for a [3D TV](#) over a non-3D TV. Another 43 percent indicated they'd only pay a premium of less than \$200. Just 11 percent would spend \$400 to \$999 extra and only 3 percent would plunk down an additional \$1,000 or more.

TV manufacturers aren't expected to price sets in the stratosphere, compared, say, with when HDTVs first became available.

But 3D will go into higher-priced sets, at least initially.

And some of the latest 3D glasses aren't cheap. For example, high-tech XpanD glasses cost about \$50, and you'll probably need a pair for each family member. You can probably expect TV makers or third parties to sell glasses in bundles.

- Content.

3D televisions are only as useful as the material you have to watch on them, of course. Pieces of the content puzzle are coming together, albeit slowly, with movies, sports and possibly concerts leading the charge.

The industry is buoyed by the appetite consumers have shown for 3D movies at the local multiplex, even at the cost of a few extra bucks per ticket. "They all thought it was more than worth it," Katzenberg says. "Everybody is winning in this."

But gee-whiz 3D effects aren't enough.

"You can no longer take a bad movie, add 3D and make it passable," says Rick Heineman a vice president of RealD in Beverly Hills, Calif. "Instead of trying to thrill people by putting the movie in their lap, you use 3D to draw them inside the movie." RealD recently integrated its technology in products from Samsung, Sony, JVC and others.

Hollywood is set to release a slew of new 3D flicks in the coming months. Katzenberg says "Avatar," made in 3D from the rival Fox studio, is the "afterburner to push this (3D) rocket ship into orbit."

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