

'Clash' of 3-D movies to hit underprepared cinemas

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In this July 23, 2009 file photo, fans wear 3-D glasses at a panel held for the movie "Alice in Wonderland" at the Comic-Con International 2009 convention held in San Diego. Movies in 3-D are becoming such big moneymakers that Hollywood studios are cramming them into the nation's theaters, even though there aren't enough screens available to give each film its fullest possible run. (AP Photo/Denis Poroy)

(AP) -- Movies in 3-D are becoming such big moneymakers that Hollywood studios are cramming them into the nation's theaters, even though there aren't enough screens available to give each film its fullest possible run.

That will mean an unprecedented number of 3-D movies for film fans to choose from this spring, and smaller profits for [Hollywood studios](#) than they might otherwise get with fewer 3-D competitors.

The pileup was created in part because studios want to capture some of the excitement surrounding "Avatar," the [James Cameron](#) epic released in December. At \$2.4 billion in global ticket sales, it is the highest-grossing film ever. In addition to the novelty or richer experience that might drive more people to see a 3-D movie, tickets to 3-D movies also cost a few dollars more.

Around the time "Avatar" came out, Warner Bros. decided to convert a remake of "Clash of the Titans" from 2-D to 3-D and push its release back a week, to April 2.

That will be the third 3-D movie to hit the market in a short span. DreamWorks Animation SKG Inc.'s "How to Train Your Dragon" comes out a week earlier, and The [Walt Disney](#) Co.'s "Alice in Wonderland" hits theaters March 5. And "Avatar" might still be playing in some places too.

But a limited number of theaters can show these movies in 3-D, because not all theater owners have bought new digital projectors and undertaken other upgrades necessary to show movies in the format. About 3,900 to 4,000 3-D-ready screens are expected to be available in the U.S. and Canada by the end of March. Typically a movie in wide release might be shown on 3,000 to 10,000 screens in North America.

In the past, a smaller number of 3-D-capable screens was adequate when one major film at a time was being released in 3-D in addition to 2-D. Each movie had a longer run, and moviegoers who wanted to see it in 3-D could pick a convenient time to go.

With three out at once, each will get less exposure because some theaters with only one or two 3-D screens will have to choose which movies to show in 3-D.

"One or all three are going to suffer in some way," said Patrick Corcoran, director of media and research for the National Association of Theatre Owners. "It makes it a much harder decision on exhibitors on what to keep or what to drop or what to add and probably should have been avoided."

Because of the lack of sufficient 3-D theaters, all three studios will also release 2-D versions of their films, as they have in the past.

Dan Fellman, head of distribution for Warner Bros., said that even with the competition, his studio will still meet its revenue targets for the 3-D version of "Clash of the Titans." If not for the 3-D logjam, it might get even more.

"Maybe everyone won't have exactly the amount of screens they had wished for," Fellman said in an interview. "But it'll certainly be enough to cover all of the major markets."

Hollywood can also take solace in the fact that this spring's 3-D screen count in North America is on pace to be twice what it was a year ago. That means that "Clash of the Titans" will have 50 percent more 3-D screens available to it than the 800 used for "Journey to the Center of the Earth" two years ago.

"If you have a theater every six miles as opposed to every three miles, if you want to see it in 3-D, you'll drive a couple of miles," Fellman said.

DreamWorks declined to comment on the situation. However, its 3-D "Monsters vs. Aliens" took in \$198 million in North American theaters last year on half as many 3-D screens as "How to Train Your Dragon" will have this spring. Even if the 3-D screen count for "Dragon" drops 50 percent on its second weekend, it'll be back to where "Monsters" began, with about 2,000 3-D screens.

Earlier 3-D films didn't have as many other 3-D movies to compete against. "Journey to the Center of the Earth" had a free run of 3-D screens for several months after its summer 2008 release. As more 3-D movies came out in the following year, one movie would largely wind down when another came out.

For example, when "Monsters vs. Aliens" came out last March, the number of screens devoted to "Coraline," a 3-D movie released the previous month, dropped 75 percent.

This year, studios have to hope that movie fans are willing to spend extra to see more than one 3-D movie in a short period.

Chuck Viane, Disney's president of distribution, said that despite a "temporary shortfall of 3-D screens," moviegoers are still primed for the experience.

There are 19 3-D movies scheduled for release this year, including Disney's "Toy Story 3" and DreamWorks' "Shrek Forever After" and "Megamind."

The next time such a scheduling crunch will occur is Dec. 17, when both "Tron Legacy" and "Yogi Bear" will appear in 3-D. The number of 3-D screens in North America should reach around 5,000 by then, alleviating some of the problem.

Amy Miles, the chief executive of theater chain Regal Entertainment Group, told investors last week that many of the company's large multiplexes have two or three 3-D screens, meaning competing 3-D films will just have to play side by side.

After starting the year with 427 3-D screens, the chain will have about 527 by the end of March and more than 1,000 by the end of the year, as

a large round of financing is expected to come through. Converting each theater screen costs about \$70,000.

"Now that this has really become something that the public has responded to, everybody is moving in," said Fellman at Warner Bros. "By next year, this won't be a conversation."

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