

3-D TV sets still viewed skeptically by many

October 7 2010, By Victor Godinez



While most TV buyers are still reluctant to dip into 3-D, David Cullers took the plunge in April, spending about \$3,000 for a 55-inch Samsung LED LCD, with a 3-D Blu-ray player.

The Dallas resident is also gaming in 3-D with his [PlayStation 3](#) console. And he's loving every minute of it. "I've been blown away how good the quality was for gaming," Cullers said.

But Cullers and other local 3-D early adopters say that while the technology is as amazing as advertised, there just isn't much 3-D video worth watching yet.

And consumer surveys indicate buyers are still put off by the higher prices of 3-D sets and the need to wear bulky glasses.

"The product is just not out there," Cullers said. "I would love to (watch more). I'd love some nature shows. That would be pretty cool."

In some ways, it's a repeat of the launch of [high-definition](#) video, when HD content was limited, boring and repetitive (if you've seen one high-def sunrise, you've seen enough), but it's now used for everything from the Super Bowl to CNN.

3-D also has its own particular challenges, though, including some that could make the technology a deal-breaker for certain viewers.

Industry analysts are confident 3-D will take off.

DisplaySearch predicts that shipments of 3-D televisions will rise from 3.4 million in 2010, or 5 percent of [flat-panel TV](#) sales, to 42.9 million, or 37 percent of sales, in 2014.

Some are more cautious, though, such as Jeff Weber, vice president of U-verse and video products at Dallas-based AT&T Inc. "Clearly, 3-D is going to happen and a lot of what we're doing on U-verse is making sure we're positioned regardless of how quickly or slowly 3-D develops in the marketplace," Weber said.

But "I'm probably one of those whose opinion is that it's going to be a little bit slower than the real optimistic predictions suggest."

FEW 3-D OFFERINGS

Most TV makers have 3-D models in stores now.

Finding something to watch on those new sets can be tricky, though.

There are only a few 3-D channels airing anywhere, with ESPN 3D by far the biggest. 3-D movies on Blu-ray discs are also few and far between.

Making the shortage worse, many movie studios are only selling their 3-D discs to buyers of specific TV brands.

For example, the 3-D Blu-ray version of Avatar coming in December will be sold, at least initially, only as a pack-in for buyers of Panasonic 3-D sets.

Verizon Communications Inc. is one of the few pay TV providers that doesn't yet offer any regular 3-D programming, despite the company's emphasis on its cutting-edge FiOS television and Internet service.

Verizon has produced occasional special events in 3-D, such as an NFL preseason game a few weeks ago, as have other providers.

But Terry Denson, vice president of video content strategy and acquisition at Verizon, said making a big marketing push for 3-D when only one or two full-time 3-D channels are available could permanently sour potential subscribers.

"We've taken a measured and disciplined approach to entering the 3-D marketplace, and we'll continue to do that until we believe there is enough meaningful content," he said.

And even as 3-D does take off, Denson said he doesn't expect the format to be as widely used as HD now is.

Instead, Denson said he expects viewers to "graze" on 3-D, watching

individual shows or movies or sports events, or even just segments of those broadcasts, in 3-D before flipping back to the 2-D version.

"I do not believe that 3-D content is going to replace HD content as the standard," Denson said. "It will be a preferred alternative: 'Am I in that mood tonight?'"

WE 'GET WRAPPED UP'

The early adopters who have bought 3-D sets are tech-savvy folks who knew going in they'd have to deal with the growing pains of a new technology.

North Richland Hills, Texas, resident Bob Childress bought a 46-inch Samsung earlier this year, and he's pleased with his purchase.

"I'm enjoying it," he said. "My wife said she wouldn't wear the stupid glasses, but after we put them on and start watching the movie, we just get wrapped up in it. (The glasses are) not that bad, and the effect is really intriguing."

Bryan Burns, the vice president of business strategy and development at ESPN who heads up the sports broadcaster's 3-D efforts, said most viewers have similar experiences once they watch a 3-D video.

"It's rolling out the same way as HD rolled out," he said. "Consumers have to see this. We've got to put it in front of them. But once we do, you hear them gasp and go, 'Oh my goodness. I have to have this.'"

Some might just be gasping at the price tag, though.

3-D TVs are still generally several hundred dollars more expensive than their 2-D-only counterparts.

While some Mitsubishi DLP sets using an older 3-D technology start at under \$1,000, newer LCD and plasma 3-D sets generally start at around \$1,300 in the 40- to 46-inch range.

The Cable & Telecommunications Association for Marketing recently conducted a survey of hundreds of TV viewers, quizzing them on their knowledge of 3-D. The subjects then watched a 30-minute 3-D clip and, armed with that firsthand experience, were polled again on their thoughts on the technology.

The findings suggest 3-D TV makers have their work cut out for them when it comes to taking the technology mainstream.

For example, before watching the 3-D clips, 25 percent of those involved in the study said they were very likely to buy a 3-D television in the next 12 months.

After wearing the glasses, watching the clips and seeing the price tags, that portion of very likely buyers dropped to 12 percent. And the percentage of those saying they were not at all likely to buy a 3-D TV in the next year jumped from 13 percent to 30 percent.

Why the cold feet?

The most commonly cited reasons were the cost of the TV (68 percent), having to wear the glasses (57 percent) and the lack of 3-D programming (44 percent).

SMOOTHING OUT KINKS

Two of those three problems will solve themselves over the next few years.

TV prices are constantly dropping, and 3-D sets will be no exception.

And new programming will come.

Time Warner Cable Inc. recently inked a deal to bring ESPN 3D to its lineup, while other carriers such as AT&T's U-verse already offer it.

And more channels are in the wings. Mark Cuban's HDNet cable network has begun developing 3-D content, for example, and there are reports HBO will launch a 3-D on-demand channel next year.

But the glasses problem could be a tougher nut to crack.

The technology for glasses-free 3-D is slowly coming along - Nintendo is promising no-glasses 3-D on its next portable video game machine.

But scaling that technology to big-screen televisions will take longer.

And the current crop of goggles is not cheap, often costing \$100 or more per pair.

"The incremental cost for the TVs is not going to be the hurdle," said AT&T's Weber. "That's going to come down, and over time most TVs are going to be 3-D-enabled. It really is the incremental cost of the glasses."

And even if the glasses get smaller and less expensive, they do inherently make it harder to divide your attention between your TV and anything else.

Keller, Texas, resident Michael Wang bought a 55-inch Samsung 3-D TV in June when he was remodeling his house.

He, too, complained of the lack of broadcast 3-D content but also noted another problem.

"You really have to lock into watching it," he said. "You can't multitask and read the paper when you watch TV anymore. I don't know if this bodes well with the current multitasking generations."

Still, for all the hiccups, it may not be long before 3-D becomes as ubiquitous as HD.

As the cost of the technology drops, TV makers will eventually build 3-D capability into all their sets, and the glasses, 3-D Blu-ray players and 3-D cable packages will simply be sold as options.

And pushing those sets out to households could happen faster than you think.

Burns at ESPN said that roughly one out of every three households buys a new TV every year.

So before long, whether you planned it or not, you'll probably have a 3-D TV in your living room.

"So it's up to us to make compelling content that will get you to call AT&T or DirecTV or whatever to sign up," Burns said.

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