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## Taking TV to the Third Dimension

For nearly a decade, television makers have been asking consumers to step into high definition. This week, they'll be asking buyers to step into three dimensions.

At the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas, companies such as Panasonic Corp., Samsung and Texas Instruments Inc. showed off TV technology capable of displaying 3-D-like pictures. The industry is billing it as the next big leap in TV technology.

The idea of bringing 3-D to screens in the home is making a comeback after failed attempts, in the 1950s and then again in the '70s. Hoping the third time will be the charm, manufacturers are making a concerted push this year to promote 3-D TV as the best way to enjoy live sporting events and action films.

"Unlike earlier attempts, it's not just a gimmick to try to sell a bad horror movie," said Doug Darrow, a Texas Instruments executive. "It's a whole different picture now."

Backers of 3-D say there are compelling forces behind the technology, which they say has evolved significantly from the days of the red and cyan glasses. Already, 1,500 US theaters are capable of showing 3-D images. In recent years, movies such as "Bolt" and "Beowulf" were shown in 3-D. Rock band U2 last year recorded a concert film in 3-D.

In December, the National Football League broadcast a 3-D game between the Oakland Raiders and the San Diego Chargers to select theaters, and the National Basketball Association is doing the same with some events during next month's All-Star game weekend.

What's more, a slate of nearly two dozen movies that can be shown in 3-D is scheduled for release over the next two years, including "Toy Story 3," "A Christmas Carol" and "Cloudy With a Chance of Meatballs."

Now, those same forces are lining up to find a way to bring 3-D into the living room.

**'There's in excess of a million TVs in homes today that are capable of showing 3-D'**

Doug Darrow, Texas Instruments executive

"In many ways you have the perfect storm brewing," said David Wertheimer, executive director of the Entertainment Technology Center at the University of Southern California. "Content makers, electronics vendors and consumers are aligned in their interest in bringing 3-D from the theater to the home."

To defray the extra expense of creating 3-D movies, which can cost 15 percent more to make, Hollywood studios are taking a hard look at ways to deliver 3-D to the home.

"The studios are putting a lot of money into producing 3-D movies for digital cinema, and there's an incredible slate of 3-D movies coming" in 2009, said Brad Hunt, former chief technology officer of the Motion Picture Association of America and now president of Digital Media Directions, a consulting company in Los Angeles. "They're now very interested in creating a thriving 3-D home video market to generate payback for their investments in making these movies."

It's too early to tell whether consumers will bite. So far, audiences have taken well to 3-D releases in theaters. Last year, half of the tickets sold for "Bolt" were for the 3-D version, even though 3-D screens represented just 32 percent of the total number of screens that played the movie, Wertheimer said.

A joint study by the Consumer Electronics Association and the Entertainment Technology Center released at last week's trade show found that nearly 15 percent of the 1,000 adults surveyed saw a 3-D movie at a theater in the last 12 months. And 16 percent said they were interested in watching 3-D

movies and TV shows at home.

“While the numbers may appear small to some, it is important to remember that 3-D is a technology few consumers associate with a home experience,” the study said.

One big question: Who will want to don 3-D glasses? The current generation is essentially miniature LCD screens that flicker at high speeds, filtering different images to the left and right eye to produce an image that appears three-dimensional.

“Early pairs looked like welders’ goggles,” said Dan Schinasi, senior manager of product planning at Samsung’s consumer electronics division. “They functioned well but they weren’t very stylish. Now, they’re pretty lightweight and they look just like sunglasses.

“Of course, in a perfect world, we wouldn’t need glasses,” he added.

Glasses or not, it will be several years before 3-D TVs become mainstream. That’s because the consumer electronics industry, movie studios and broadcasters have yet to agree on standards for recording, transmitting, receiving and interpreting 3-D signals. Many are hoping those technical details can be ironed out this year, Hunt said. Only then can the work of creating discs, players and TV sets to display 3-D video begin in earnest, he said.

That hasn’t stopped companies such as Philips, Samsung, Mitsubishi and Panasonic from introducing “3-D-ready” sets. Philips last fall demonstrated a 3-D display that didn’t require glasses. Panasonic is expected to make announcements about its 3-D plasma technology at the Consumer Electronics Show.

Some 3-D-capable televisions already are in consumer homes, including a number of Mitsubishi rear-projection models as well as Samsung’s rear-projection and plasma TVs. They still need the 3-D programming, conversion software and the glasses to display such images.

“There’s in excess of a million TVs in homes today that are capable of showing 3-D, and most people don’t even know it,” said Darrow, the brand and marketing manager for Texas Instruments’ DLP Group in Dallas, which makes high-end chips responsible for displaying 3-D images in the vast majority of rear-projection TVs.

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