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3-D studios seek student tech advice

Participants at the center give companies feedback about their new 3-D technologies.

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The Entertainment Technology Center at USC is reaching out to students for a fresh perspective on innovative products as companies try to bring new 3-D technologies into consumers' homes.

The ETC, an organized research unit within the School of Cinematic Arts, conducts focus group research for sponsors — including Warner Bros., Disney, Fox and Paramount Pictures — to provide companies with information about what consumers want.

"Our mission is to understand what consumers want and help studios deliver," said KC Blake, ETC's director of business development.

While several 3-D movies have played in theaters, many in the film and gaming business are searching for the right format to package the 3-D product.

"The cost of making a 3-D movie can be about 25 to 35 percent more," Blake said. "They need to be able to sell it for the home."

Because 3-D technology is an emerging market, each company approaches product design differently, potentially creating consumer confusion when having to purchase equipment that may not be compatible, said Bryan Gonzalez, the technical project specialist for the center.

"We don't develop or tell people what to develop," Gonzalez said. "We just help them arrive at the same place."

In its "Anytime/Anywhere Content Lab," the ETC has samples of various products — including the iPhone, PlayStation 3 and a device called Roku, which delivers Netflix from computers to televisions — that consumers use to watch films.

The Center studies whether consumers can justify paying for 3-D content and necessary hardware, said business administration graduate student Ryan Jackson. If consumers aren't willing to invest, the studios will have to absorb the cost.

Matt Erstling, a junior majoring in business administration who has participated in the center's studies, said it is flattering to have the studios and technology companies turn to USC students for advice.

"This is why I moved to L.A., because you don't get this type of opportunities on the East Coast," Erstling said. "Unless you go to [Massachusetts Institute of Technology] or some place like it you won't get exposed to this type of technology."

One of the key markets the 3-D technology is catering to is the gaming industry.

"Video gamers will buy whatever is necessary to enjoy their game, and 3-D is a new way to enjoy the narrative," Jackson said.

The ETC uses students' opinions of the technology as an indicator of how trends will be five to 10 years down the line, Gonzalez said.

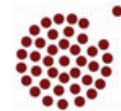
"Though consumers can buy 3-D top-of-the-line glasses and compatible TVs, it will be years until DVDs and games will be released," he said.

Haili Sun, a freshman majoring in aerospace engineering, said he was pleased that major companies sought the advice of USC students in their research.

"It's great to have your opinions wanted and heard because we're in a position where people are listening," Sun said.

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