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NAB probes future of 3-D

Disney's Mark Zoradi calls for technical standards

By Carolyn Giardina

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LAS VEGAS -- Disney motion pictures group president Mark Zoradi emphasized that "we don't want a format war for 3-D for the home" as he called for technical standards to enable the wide adoption of 3-D on Sunday at the National Association of Broadcasters Show.

"We view 3-D as part of a holistic business opportunity, and we need to upgrade every distribution channel in order to support the new 3-D that we are now producing," he said in a keynote at the NAB digital cinema summit, during which he previewed content including a new 3-D teaser trailer for "Toy Story 3."

Citing the recent Blu-Ray Disc/HD DVD battle, he said: "Your standards will allow us to creatively manage our digital content. We need 3-D standards to be flexible ... allowing audiences to see 3-D any way they want to view it and in the highest possible quality."

The many moving parts to 3-D -- both for theatrical release and the home -- were explored during the weekend summit and will continue to be analyzed as the full NAB Show exhibition and convention opens Monday in Las Vegas.

Making news as the event was getting under way, international standards-setting body the Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers -- which produced the summit with the Entertainment Technology Center at USC -- released an influential report on 3-D that could result in 3-D home standards in one year.

The document outlines recommendations and findings of the SMPTE 3-D task force that will be used by the society to complete a set of stereoscopic 3-D home master standards for content viewed on TVs and computer monitors.

Wendy Aylsworth, SMPTE vp engineering and senior vp technology at Warner Bros. Studios, expects the core standards to be completed by June 2010.

On the theatrical distribution side of the equation, eyes remain on digital-cinema deployment, as these screens are required to enable digital 3-D. The set standards follow the Digital Cinema Initiatives technical specification.

"No product today meets the DCI spec," warned Michael Karagosian, president of MKPE Consulting and senior technical advisor to the National Association of Theater Owners, adding that this included both servers and projectors currently in the field. "We need to get there. DCI compliance is written into the deployment funding agreements."

These funding agreements generally rely on a virtual-print-fee model through which the studios pay a fee per movie, per screen to help offset the theater conversion costs. But the deployment plans also involve raising capital, and as a result, they have been largely stalled since last fall because of the troubled economy.

Karagosian reported on some recent activity. For instance, just before the start of NAB, Digital Cinema Implementation Partners -- a joint venture between AMC, Cinemark and Regal -- and Sony reached a virtual-print-fee agreement. Warner Bros. is now the only major studio that has not yet reached a deal with DCIP, which Karagosian reported is working to secure the remaining needed funding. "We hope to see this move forward later this year," he said.

D-cinema deployer Cinedigm already has roughly 5,000 digital screens installed and is in the process of raising remaining capital for its next phase of its installation plans "There are flickers of light again in these challenging markets," Cinedigm president of media services Chuck Goldwater said.

Meanwhile, projector maker NEC outlined some creative financing programs it has created with 3-D providers Dolby and RealD.

Goldwater made a case for alternative content, saying that a ticket to the recent live 3-D cinema broadcast of the BCS college football championship ranged between \$15-\$25, and it grossed more than nine of the top 10 movies showing in U.S. theaters on that particular day.



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Sony is meanwhile looking into how to bring games to the alternative content discussion.

Speaking on theatrical content, Darcy Antonellis, president of Warner Bros. Technical Operations, said: "In 2010, we expect to see a fair amount of movement in the space. Each studio is selecting projects." She added that Warners is exploring animation as well as live action.

"We are hoping to amortize the cost of 3-D production with theatrical and home distribution," she said. "We also need to focus on what we have in our library. We have 40 or so titles in our library that are potential candidates."

She added, "We want to get those library titles out there," saying that home releases need to be "good and consistent" as well as accessible to the mass market.

Addressing production, she said: "The economics are the economics. We need improvements on the production side. 3-D production does add time; it certainly adds costs."

Others addressed the need for 3-D production education and infrastructure. "If this is truly an industry that justifies installing more screens, it has to be much more ubiquitous than three or four production companies," 3Ality Digital CEO Steve Schklair said.

To that end, 3Ality plans to offer its 3flex camera rigs for sale, as well as introduce a 3-D production training and certification program.

Panasonic confirmed at NAB that it is developing 3-D production gear including camera and display devices.

Director Patrick Lussier gave a keynote about the production of his latest film, Lionsgate's "My Bloody Valentine 3D," which made \$50.5 million and was produced for only \$16 million.

He concluded: "3-D is the future if there are more venues to support the volume of content. The second it stops making money is the second it stops being viable."

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