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3D TV is here

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CNHI

NORTH TONAWANDA — As 3D TV sets get set to overtake the market this summer, consumers are clamoring for a glimpse of the new technology.



Visitors wearing 3D glasses watch 3D images at a theater in the Australia Pavilion on the second day of the Shanghai World Expo. The Associated Press

But, as with other new technologies that hit the market, there is a burning question: Should I buy now or wait until later?

In the case of 3D TV, the answer seems to be a little of both.

Panasonic and Samsung have released their first 3D models to the marketplace, while Sony, LG and other manufacturers are set to unveil theirs in the near future.

In a diagnostic that it conducted for its June issue, Consumer Reports tested the Panasonic and Samsung models. The magazine concluded that the depth, color and definition make 3D TV viewing comparable to the movie theater, but that those viewers who aren't burning to consume the new technology would be better off waiting.

"Blu-ray discs with 3D content are just arriving, and while 3D broadcasts are starting up, it will be a while before there are many of them," Paul Reynolds, the magazine's electronics editor, said in a release.

Such broadcasts include next month's World Cup and a series of Yankees baseball games being telecast on YES Network via DirecTV. Having conducted tests on 3D viewing for the past 18 months, lab technician Bryan Gonzalez agrees with the magazine.

"I'm of the mindset that first-generation products are for people who are at the edge of consumer technology," said Gonzalez, who runs the laboratories at the Entertainment Technology Center at the University of Southern California. "It really doesn't hurt to wait."

The ETC is a branch of USC's School of Cinematic Arts and was founded in 1993 in part by "Star Wars" creator George Lucas. The group's goal is to educate consumers, businesspeople and industry leaders on the impact of new technology throughout the entertainment industry.

Work with 3D TV began at the ETC in late 2008. With 3D just starting to become a revived trend at movie theaters at that time, the group wanted to know what 3D would look like on a smaller screen, Gonzalez said.

“There was a lack of information about 3D in general,” he said. “This 3D is brand new to a lot of people. A lot of what we’ve done is just basic education.”

That education begins with dispelling the notion that the blue-and-red glasses of yesteryear are still relevant. Today’s 3D viewing utilizes active shutter technology, which uses battery-powered glasses to manipulate the viewing experience. The refresh rate of 3D TV sets is 120 frames of film per second — more than four times a traditional set’s rate — and the glasses flutter off the images one eye at a time. The brain then overlaps what’s quickly seen by the right eye and left eye to create a 3D image.

“With today’s technology, you’re able to maintain that color quality and picture quality,” Gonzalez said.

“Most of the glasses now are branded, but there are some companies that are working on universal glasses.”

Since this is a new type of viewing, Gonzalez said that a few users might experience some disorientation. But any ill feelings will subside in time, he said.

“A person who’s new to 3D, they are so engrossed by the image that they don’t notice any side effects,” he said. “The more 3D they watch, the more comfortable that experience becomes.”

Also making the experience more comfortable, Gonzalez said, is a sufficiently large screen. While the viewer could get away with a 42-inch screen if he sits close to the screen, Gonzalez recommends at least a 46-inch screen to allow the effects to be fully realized.

Consumer Reports, while lauding the overall products, found some bugs in the models they tested. The Samsung sets that were tested were found to have subtle ghosting of 3D images, which indicates that the images weren’t being kept completely separate by the glasses. Some cloudiness due to uneven backlighting was also noticed on one of the Samsung models.

Within the next couple months, consumers will have all sorts of screen sizes, formats and manufacturers to choose from. Whether you buy now or later, Gonzalez said you’ll ultimately be right.

“If you buy it now, it will not go obsolete,” said Gonzalez, who emphasized that 3D sets can fully support 2D programming. “But it really doesn’t hurt to wait. I wouldn’t necessarily buy this summer, but by Christmas ... a lot of those kinds will be worked out.”

The sets tested by Consumer Reports retailed for about \$2,500 each.

“The price of 3D TVs and Blu-ray players is likely to drop, and there should be more 3D content to watch in time,” the magazine reported.

While some manufacturers are working on sets that will cost closer to \$1,700, Gonzalez wouldn’t consider a higher price to be wasted money.

“I feel that a lot of consumers feel that 3D TVs are going to be very expensive,” he said. “That’s not bad pricing for that type of television. It’s going to be within reach of many consumers.”