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In your face: 'G-Force' joins craze for 3-D fun

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Even on an already busy Utah holiday weekend, the new 3-D movie "G-Force" is sure to suck a major share of people into the theaters.

The allure is probably not the concept of brainy animated guinea pigs trying to save the world, nor even the involvement of Hollywood hotshot producer Jerry Bruckheimer.

There's just something enticing about that third dimension.

"Parts of the film seem to come out close to you, and they pull you in," said Ogden resident Branden Pierce, 33, who saw "Ice Age: Dawn of the Dinosaurs" in 3-D last week at the Megaplex 13.

"We go to all the 3-D movies," said wife Sarah Pierce, 32. "There's just a little more detail and a little more excitement. Everything seems a little bit closer."

Raymon Pentecost, of Ogden, had his own reason for attending the same showing.

" 'Cause you get to wear the glasses," said the 6-year-old, looking cool behind the theater's mirrored 3-D specs. "And you get to see things like volcanoes come to you."

Blake Andersen, senior vice president and general manager of Megaplex Theatres, said the 3-D trend is big and getting bigger.

"There are now more than 5,000 screens across the country with some form of 3-D ability to show films," he said, in an e-mail interview. "Walt Disney and 20th Century Fox are two of the major studios that have made a big commitment to 3-D technology. Walt Disney has committed to showing all of its films that they are producing at least through 2012 in 3-D format.

"Through the technology of today, the 3-D format has been able to make the experience a lot more fun," Anderson said. "The colors and action parts of the 3-D films just come right off the screen."

In addition to Megaplex 13, the Layton and Newgate Tinseltowns also offer 3-D films.

How it works

The technology works by mimicking the way our eyes function, according to a 3-D glasses informational Web site, www.3-Dglasses.net.

Our eyes, about two inches apart, work on a binocular system that gives us two almost identical images of whatever we see. Our brains fuse the two images in a way that adds the depth we would not get viewing the same scene with a single eye.

With 3-D film, we see the same scene from slightly different angles, and our brains fuse them, adding the effect of depth.

For live-action 3-D films, cameras shoot the action from slightly different angles. For animated 3-D films, scenes are made up of images in which colors are separated electronically.

"G-Force" is a hybrid, using both techniques since it has both live and animated characters, said Phil Lelyveld, project manager of the Consumer 3D Experience Lab at the University of Southern California's Entertainment Technology Center.



After films are prepared for 3-D viewing, viewers who want the full effect must wear the special glasses.

"The two-color glasses, used for years and years, go back to the 1800s," Lelyveld said. "They achieve the 3-D effect by sacrificing color. One lens is red and the other is green or blue, so there is a color each eye cannot see.

"(The newer) polarized glasses are slightly gray in tint, and they don't take the color out. With polarized glasses, which look like sunglasses, the light is spinning clockwise in one eye and counterclockwise in the other. If you tilt your head, you still get the 3-D effect, unlike with the colored glasses. Polarized glasses currently predominate in theaters."

Viewed without 3-D glasses, the onscreen images seem to have color shadows that confuse the eye.

A third system is used in IMAX theaters, which use a shutter system to show images to one eye, then the other, Lelyveld said. The glasses viewers wear also have an electronic shutter system, synchronized with the onscreen system, to force one view, then the other, forcing the eyes to see differently and the brain to produce the effect of depth.

The bad old days

In the 1950s, showing 3-D films required two projectors angled toward the same viewing screen.

"The projectionist had to thread two projectors up to the exact same frame so when they started, they would be in sync," said Van Summerill, an Ogden film buff, former projectionist and historian for Peery's Egyptian theater.

Three-D films produced in the 1950s were gimmicky, Summerill said. He was a boy of 10 when the first 3-D film, "Bwana Devil" (1952), came to Ogden. Robert Stack starred as a British Railway engineer whose crew in Kenya was being attacked and eaten by a pair of hungry lions.

"They had lions jumping toward the camera and natives throwing spears at the cameras," Summerill said. "Most people rated it as a pretty bad movie, but when you are 10, you don't realize what is a bad movie and what isn't."

Arriving next was the 1953 film "It Came From Outer Space."

"It scared me to death," Summerill recalled. "I thought it was a great movie."

Hollywood studios churned out 3-D features and shorts for the next couple of years, then 3-D productions dwindled, Summerill said.

"The novelty wore off early," he said. "There's only so many times you can watch something thrown at you from the screen."

Those 3-D films were marketed as a way to get people away from their new television sets and back to the theaters, said Robert Thompson, founding director of the Bleier Center for Television and Popular Culture, at New York's Syracuse University.

"You could see a moving picture in your living room, but for 3-D, you had to go out," Thompson said. "But it remained something of a gimmick, with stuff coming at you. It was more based on the aesthetics of a roller-coaster ride than on filmmaking."

Novelty no more

Lelyveld said 3-D made its commercial comeback four or five years ago, thanks to advances in digital projection.

"The shift in technology made it possible to have really successful 3-D," he said. "Digital technology eliminated the image alignment issues of the past."

Those alignment issues included both the early need for two precisely placed projectors aimed at viewing screens, to create overlapping images, and for the more modern issue of maintaining the alignment between the images intended for the left and the right eyes, Lelyveld said.

Now, any digital projector used for a 2-D film can be fitted with a device that adds a shuttering effect that contributes to the 3-D effect. In addition, 3-D films can be shown on regular white screens, rather than the reflective silver screens once required.

Lelyveld said 3-D films tend to return in 20-year cycles, and usually only four or five films are made per cycle. But this time around,

studios have announced 34 3-D films to debut in 2010 alone, he said.

"I think 3-D films are here to stay, in theaters at least," Lelyveld said. "One of our jobs here is to see how it can move into the consumer space. With young people migrating into 3-D screenings, we are focusing on getting 3-D into homes."

The new frontier

If 3-D television can provide a satisfying viewing experience, consumers will be willing to invest, Thompson said.

"The bar is getting much higher for what constitutes a thrilling video experience for us," he said. "We used to be happy watching TV on a 19-inch Trinitron. Now we want high-definition 50-inch flat screens with stereo sound systems.

"I think the appetite is there for what 3-D provides. When color came out in the movies, it took over virtually all movies. When sound came along, within five years all movies had sound."

With film studios racing to employ each advance in 3-D technology, the effects are only getting better.

"The 3-D film industry will continue to grow as long as technology can continue to improve and impress moviegoers," Anderson said. "The next big step will be 3-D without the glasses.

"3-D is constantly improving and getting less expensive to produce. I have seen clips from Disney's new film 'A Christmas Carol' that is scheduled to be released in November, and the effects in 3-D are incredible."

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