

'Beowulf's' bow takes 3-D to the next level

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If you're looking to see Beowulf take on Grendel this weekend in 3-D, you have some choices.

Paramount/Warner Bros.' anticipated "Beowulf," from director Robert Zemeckis, will be the first Hollywood feature to open simultaneously in Imax 3-D and digital 3-D.

This looks like the beginning of a new trend. More 3-D features will open in both digital and Imax 3-D formats in 2008. Already scheduled are the U2 concert film "U2 3D" and Summit Entertainment's CG-animated "Fly Me to the Moon." Also, DreamWorks announced this week that its animated 2009 3-D releases "Monsters vs. Aliens" and "How to Train Your Dragon," as well as the 2010 opener "Shrek Goes Fourth," will be released in both digital and Imax 3-D formats.

The release of "Beowulf" will help expose the 3-D format to the widest audience to date. The film will open in 3-D on about 800 screens domestically.

Stakeholders agree that this activity is good for 3-D.

Says Richard Gelfond, co-chairman and co-CEO of Imax Corp., "The more 3-D the better it is for Imax because as films are produced in 3-D there's more content available."

Still, Imax 3-D and digital 3-D represent immensely different economic models. In fact, even

digital 3-D has variations, with vendors offering different approaches to projection and viewing.

The industry will be closely watching how each of these 3-D models fare as the format evolves.

Digital 3-D is still young, having hatched in late 2005 with the release of Disney's "Chicken Little." This method is enabled by a 3-D system being installed in a theater that is equipped with a digital-cinema projector. About 4,600 digital-cinema projectors have been installed domestically, and many more deployment plans are being worked out. Current 3-D system providers include Real D, Dolby and NuVision. The content is typically distributed on hard drives.

Real D was the first 3-D system out of the gate and represents the lion's share of current installations. At press time, it was expected that there would be about 620 Real D-equipped auditoriums showing "Beowulf" in 3-D this weekend. Real D's technique requires the use of a "silver screen" and "circular polarized" glasses. It enables 3-D on screens maxing out around 47 feet high. For any system, screen size comes down to how much light can get to the screen from the projector.

Dolby recently completed its beta phase, and deployment has started. It expects to have about 30 screens domestically and 75 worldwide for the "Beowulf" opening. Installed systems support on average 40-foot-high screens. Dolby's system doesn't require a special type of screen, using those that are standard in today's theaters, but audiences would use special Dolby glasses.

NuVision also recently began U.S. deployment of its 3-D system, and the company estimated it would have six screens showing "Beowulf" in the U.S. and about 100 in Europe. It doesn't require a special screen.

Imax has been in business for 40 years. Its system is a 70mm film-based projection and distribution model, where the images are rendered on screens reaching from 50 feet high to 70 feet wide to as large as 80 feet high and 100 feet wide.

Imax positions itself as a premium experience. "Imax 3-D is the first-class experience," Gelfond says. "Imax 3-D allows people to be 'inside' the movie. ... The screen goes to the peripheral vision of the viewer."

He adds: "Digital 3-D has its place. Because of its footprint, it allows a lot of people to see features in 3-D where they otherwise couldn't."

Michael Lewis, CEO of 3-D provider Real D, says: "We feel digital is really the future of where 3-D is going to be. We've focused on 'how do we get this to every multiplex in the world.' "

Deployment costs and models vary. For digital, the projectors in many cases are installed via the virtual print fee model used for 2-D digital cinema by exhibitors -- a separate deal from that with the 3-D provider. Imax models include joint ventures and leasing.

"It actually is two different sets of economics," says Howard Lukk, Disney's vp production technology. "(For instance), the preparation of (Imax) prints is expensive. It's a lot more expensive than for a digital 3-D model." He said models also vary as to who supplies the glasses for digital presentations.

Adds Shindler of digital technology in multiplexes: "From an exhibitor's point of view, in digital, if a movie doesn't play well, they can move another movie in there instantly. In a megaplex, there are always going to be enough movies playing that they can move (a title)."

Shifting to boxoffice expectations, generally insiders predict that the per-theater average for "Beowulf" in 3-D will be two-and-a-half to three times that for the 2-D version. Some say Imax's average might go even higher.

With so many more theaters playing digital 3-D than Imax 3-D, digital would presumably have the higher total boxoffice of the two formats, Schindler says. "Imax can't compete with (about 85) screens, even though seating capacity in many of the Imax theaters is much bigger," he says.

Looking to 2008, many are eager to see what technological developments are on the horizon and what impact they might have on these models.

Notably, Imax is developing a digital projection and distribution system for its format that the company expects to launch in June. This could prompt significant change in the company's economics.

As well, Real D has developed a technology it plans to launch next year that it says will allow its system to reach screens as high as 70 feet with a single projector, which the company hopes will help step up deployment in larger auditoriums. Newcomers Dolby and NuVision are only just starting to deploy systems, making them a factor to watch in the coming years.

Digital delivery methods also are likely to shift as more screens mean that distributors can take advantage of economies of scale. Explains Lukk: "It's going to be a hybrid world with some hard drives, satellite and networked fiber-delivery systems."

For the consumer, all of this simply means that there are more opportunities to view a motion picture in 3-D. Shindler points out: "There are a lot of consumers that are not familiar with 3-D, and they are going to go to whatever theater is most convenient for them."

Lewis looks forward to continued movement in 3-D. "Clearly, 3-D is where cinema is going," he says. "We've seen every major studio plus major film directors embrace it. It's going to be the platform for releasing tentpole movies."