

Live events coming to theaters Next wave of 3-D business so close you can touch it

By Carolyn Giardina
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Get ready for a radical change in thinking about theatrical entertainment.

Alternative content is not a new concept, but the next new thing to enter the dialogue are events broadcast live to theaters in 3-D. That could mean fans will head to their local theaters for a group 3-D viewing of the NBA Finals or the Super Bowl, stadium concerts and the like.

And it is closer than many realize.

"I think the public can expect to see a live 3-D broadcast in a theater in 2008," said Vince Pace, founder of 3-D production innovator Pace in Burbank. "(It is) possible today with existing technology."

Pace and others are encouraged to see stakeholders getting involved in these discussions.

"About 12 live events are being discussed; which ones will actually make it is hard to say," Real D president Joshua Greer said.

The issues that need to be overcome include a variety of business and deployment factors.

"It's not the technology that is holding up a live broadcast to the theaters. It's rights and business case -- putting together something that make sense from a financial point of view," 3ality Digital founder and CEO Steve Schklair said. "If you were to do a live sports broadcast, you would want it to be an event of some stature because that is what would bring people to theaters. (But) rights to any events of stature -- the Super Bowl, World Cup -- are pretty well sewn up by the broadcasters. That has to be dealt with."

Schklair added that from a financial standpoint, a 3-D broadcast would involve production and theater costs "and in the middle, two rights-holders -- the league and the broadcasters -- that already have the rights."

Still, Marty Schindler, principal in consulting firm the Schindler Perspective, said, "There are deals to be had, but it requires a lot of effort on a lot of people's parts."

Mike Rokosa, the NBA's vp engineering, brings a different perspective to the discussion. "I don't think rights would be the holdup as much as, right now, the volume (of theaters) that have the connectivity to receive a live signal, which is quite limited," he said. "If there were a fair number of venues that were able to take a live feed, then we'd have something that we could at least start to talk about."

Greer had similar thoughts.

"We still haven't sent the large-scale rollout of satellite technology, so while (live broadcasts) can be done, the question is, where can you put it? ... Over the next six months you will see a multitude of tests with all different types of content. But if you are going to rent satellite time, you want to have thousands of theaters, and that is still going to take a little time."

From a technical standpoint, if a theater already is equipped with a digital-cinema system and 3-D capabilities, a satellite dish or some sort of bandwidth connection and a decoder also would be

required. Rokosa said they are not an enormous additional expense, but there is a Catch-22: "If they are going to invest a couple grand to do this, where is the content?" he said. "It is a little bit of a quandary."

Said Greer, "To me, the much bigger issue is who is going to pay for the satellite transmission and the production."

Such companies as Pace and 3ality have been developing 3-D production and post techniques for the challenging shoots. Pace is one of a small number of companies that developed a 3-D broadcast news van.

Working with Pace, the NBA began testing in this arena a year ago, when the league and the 3-D innovator teamed to present invite-only live 3-D HD viewing parties at the Mandalay Bay Hotel in Las Vegas of the NBA's All-Star Saturday Night and the 56th All-Star Game. Additionally, the Cleveland Cavaliers and the NBA, along with Pace, offered a live 3-D HD screening in Cleveland of the NBA Finals from San Antonio. An estimated 14,000 turned out for the event.

A timely concert also could be a big attraction, as Disney proved last month when it opened "Hannah Montana and Miley Cyrus: Best of Both Worlds Concert" in digital 3-D on 683 screens. The feature opened No. 1 at the boxoffice and went on to earn a whopping \$63 million.

The concert film opened Feb. 1, the day after the live tour wrapped (and after a breakneck 11-week postproduction schedule).

"Material that reaches the theater and has some time sensitivity to it is part of the draw," said Pace, who was an executive producer on "Hannah Montana." "I think that's where alternative content and films of that nature are going to head."

He said a driving force was to produce "Hannah Montana" quickly enough "to take advantage of the fact that this is something that people are aware of and were interested in. I think this was a complement to the concert rather than a byproduct."

The movement toward 2-D broadcasts have already started. Last month, for example, Walt Disney Studios, ESPN and digital-cinema provider Access Integrated Technologies delivered a live HD broadcast of college basketball -- the University of Texas vs. Texas A&M -- live on 15 digital-cinema screens in Texas. It marked the first event at which AccessIT's CineLive technology, which enables live 2-D and 3-D streaming of content to theaters, was employed for a major sports event since the technology was announced last fall.

Broadcasting live 2-D content is more manageable. "The challenge with 3-D is we need twice as much bandwidth to deliver the same amount of content," Greer said.

A final factor is the possibility of broadcasting live 3-D content to the home. The first 3-D-ready TV sets have been unveiled, but delivery standards (viewed as a critical issue), content availability, set penetration and a quantifiable audience are just a few of the challenges that must be addressed.

Some also believe that autostereo technology (enabling the viewing of 3-D without the use of special glasses) is needed for in-home 3-D to really happen. And again, a sort chicken-and-egg scenario will exist because there is no real installed base of viewers yet, nor is there a steady stream of content.

Meanwhile, broadcasters are focused on the analog shut-off, now less than a year away.

"I also think the quality of 3-D entertainment as it translates to the home is still one to two years away," Pace said. "That doesn't mean you'll not start to see material being presented prior to that."