

New dimensions for 3-D cinema in 2008

By Sam Andrews
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LONDON -- Paramount's success with "Beowulf" in November shows that movies in 3-D have the potential to "rejuvenate the cinemagoing experience," according to wide-ranging predictions from Screen Digest released Monday.

An increase in the global 3-D screen count and more high-profile titles on the way -- including U2's concert film "U2 3D?" New Line's "Journey 3-D" and Disney's animated "Bolt" -- would lead to a major uptick in theatrical business, Screen Digest film and cinema analyst Charlotte Jones said.

"Our research has shown that 3-D films can earn up to three times more revenue per screen, as filmgoers continue to demonstrate a strong preference for the 3-D screenings and are happy to pay more for the superior, immersive experience," she said.

"2008 will be the year that 3-D movies really enter the mainstream multiplex environment as the 3-D screen count more than doubles again to hit our forecasts of 3,000 by the close of 2008 -- on track to 6,000 by 2009."

On the home entertainment front, Screen Digest suggested that the 2007 stalemate over the two high-definition formats -- HD DVD and Blu-ray -- likely will see a swift shift to an endgame in 2008 in a bid to overcome consumer apathy.

"Next year, we expect to see shifting alliances, and with such a delicate stalemate, it's only going to take one major player to swap sides and the market will shift seismically," analyst Richard Cooper said. "We believe this will happen over the course of 2008, with major players moving to format-agnostic or format-exclusive positions.

"Both formats must start to make an impact on the HDTV viewer next year if high-def is to become more than just a niche market; we have seen hardware prices drop in 2007, but the battle over content in 2008 will be the year this storm breaks," he added.

In the increasingly important computer and console games market, Screen Digest said that this holiday season would provide the first retail competition among Sony's PlayStation 3, Microsoft's Xbox 360 and Nintendo's Wii. Senior

games analyst Piers Harding-Rolls predicted that Nintendo would win the battle convincingly but that in 2008 the market climate would change in Sony's favor as its pipeline of exclusive content and the launch of multimedia services will result in a significant uplift for the PS3.

"One of the market shifts to watch out for in 2008 will be the continued evolution of Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 from games consoles to multimedia hubs," he said. "Now that these multimedia services -- online video, IPTV, digital terrestrial TV and PVR functionality -- are now available or poised to come online in different markets, this strategy is emerging as a key console battleground for Microsoft and Sony."

In the mobile entertainment arena, Screen Digest predicted that next year will see significant launches of broadcast mobile TV in some major markets, including China, France and Germany.

Senior mobile media analyst David MacQueen, however, suggested that key dates will be missed. "Although services may launch, coverage will be far from nationwide when key sporting events kick off, namely the Olympics and UEFA Euro 2008 (soccer) championship," he said. "A key opportunity to measure European consumer desire for mobile TV services is likely to be lost."

"The 3G TV services, provided by operators such as Orange and Vodafone, will benefit most from any boost in viewing numbers these events provide."

MacQueen said that where broadcast services already have launched, such as in Italy and the U.S., the events could provide a significant surge in subscribers.

"Sports programming from the likes of Sky (in Italy) and ESPN (in the U.S.) has already proved popular and could drive uptake of mobile TV in those countries," he said.