

3D television is here -- are you ready?

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High-definition television (HDTV) sets first hit the U.S. market in 1998. Today, many people have ditched their old, boxy sets and have a flatscreen set mounted on the wall.

Now the next breakthrough in home viewing technology is starting to emerge, one that will have the picture flying off the wall.

Three-dimensional television sets (3D TV) hit the Springfield market toward the end of March.

Stacey Bacon, a home entertainment specialist at Best Buy, 3193 S. Veterans Parkway, estimates the store sold about 15 sets in the first two weeks they were available.

The first one went to Jason Lee, owner of New Age Tattoos and Body Piercings in Springfield.

“I’ve been looking forward to it ever since I’ve heard they were coming out,” he said.

Lee describes himself as a hardcore video game player. There currently aren’t any games out specifically designed for 3D, and he admits there isn’t a lot of content available for viewing yet.

Still, he couldn’t keep himself from taking the 3D plunge.

“That’s the price of impatience,” Lee said, laughing.

If you’re still thinking about whether to buy a 3D set, here are some answers to common questions.

Where can I see how it works?

Those interested in getting a firsthand look can check out two display models at Best Buy: a 50-inch Panasonic Plasma 3D HDTV (\$2,969.99) and a 55-inch Samsung LED 3D model (\$2,499.98).

Beatty TeleVisual will also be offering 3D sets later this summer. Jason Beatty said the price

won't be significantly higher than that for HD sets of comparable quality because 3D essentially is an added feature.

What does a 3D TV set look like?

It looks like a flat-panel TV set. 3D sets maintain the 16:9 screen ratio — a measurement of the screen's width versus its height — and when the picture is turned off, it won't look any different from any other flatscreen. (An HDTV set with a 16:9 ratio has a much wider, more rectangular picture than the squarish 4:3 ratio screens on most TVs produced in the 20th century.)

What does it look like when it's turned on?

The 3D TV set promises a vivid, three-dimensional picture that previously could only be seen in movie theaters.

Bacon describes the experience as being in a diorama where you can almost reach out and touch the action. She said that a river-rafting scene on a demo disc that Best Buy has on display never fails to make people jump.

Will I need 3D glasses?

To get the full effect, yes. And you'll need special 3D glasses at that.

The familiar blue-and-red lens spectacles used in movie theaters won't work at home. Active shutter glasses designed for use with the TVs have liquid crystal lenses that rapidly lighten and darken over each eye to affect the three-dimensional image. The glasses are synced to the display through an infrared or Bluetooth signal and are powered by a battery.

As a fashion accessory, think Devo-era sci-fi.

"People are going to be sitting around looking like Geordi from 'Star Trek,'" Beatty said. The glasses start out at about \$100 a pair for lower-end models and go up to almost \$200, adding to the overall purchase price. The glasses also are not universal — you can only use the glasses designed for the specific brand of TV set you buy.

The glasses might prove uncomfortable, especially to those who'll need to wear them over their prescription glasses. Lee said people with large heads may find them a tight fit.

Can you watch TV without the glasses?

You won't need the glasses when watching 2D content on a 3D TV. Watching 3D content without them, however, results in a double image.

I feel nauseous watching 3D movies. Will this happen with 3D TV?

Maybe.

There have long been reports of 3D movies causing headaches and nausea. Beatty said newer technology and the shutter glasses should help eliminate viewing fatigue, but because it's new to the home market, he can't exactly be sure what to expect.

"When you consider a two-hour movie, there's so much to take in visually that I can see it taking some time to get used to," he said.

Philips is developing 3D technology that doesn't require glasses, but Beatty said the picture quality is still lacking at this point.

Is there anything to watch in 3D?

The technology is at a critical time as it attempts to win the hearts and eyes of viewers. Right now, 3D content is scarce, but providers are gearing up for a revolution.

Movies will lead the way. Beatty recently sat in on a Webinar where it was reported that 56 three-dimensional movies are expected to be released in 2010. That should get the ball rolling on consumers' Blu-ray disc collections (provided they've upgraded to a 3D Blu-ray player.)

"Because the studios have shown commitment to making 3D in the home successful, consumers can expect an increase in 3D-ready DVDs in the near future," said Katie Dodd, a former Springfield resident who works for MEC, an agency that conducts digital media campaigns for video releases.

Because success at the box office is critical to success in the home entertainment market, television manufacturers are counting on Hollywood to lure in consumers. Films such as "Avatar" and "Alice in Wonderland" have won over legions of fans, but they've also raised the bar for 3D quality.

"Clash of the Titans," although earning \$61 million in its opening weekend, has been criticized for having blurry action scenes and dim images in its 3D version. The movie was originally shot as a flat-image film, then underwent a "quickie conversion" to 3D to capitalize on the buzz generated by "Avatar."

"On the 2D movies with the up-conversion, you're not going to get the full 3D like you might expect," Beatty said.

Despite concerns over conversions, the studios are moving in this direction. "Star Wars" and "Titanic" are two of the blockbusters getting the 3D treatment for both the big screen and home Blu-ray market. Other 3D content will be available soon.

What about 3D television broadcasts?

In June, DIRECTV will offer a free software upgrade to HD customers, who will then be able to access three channels dedicated to 3D programming, including pay-per-view and on-demand

offerings. Cable sports network ESPN will also debut a 3D channel in June, just in time for this summer's World Cup soccer tournament.

Beatty said that by the end of the year, consumers will have access to more than 15 video-on-demand channels, up to a dozen cable or satellite channels and about 12 to 15 Internet channels providing 3D content. There are also 8,000 3D YouTube videos ready to stream.

As for the major broadcast networks, they've dipped their toes into the 3D waters — NBC has aired an episode of “Chuck” in 3D, and CBS did 3D broadcasts of the NCAA men's college basketball tournament in movie theaters. But it may be awhile before you see, for example, “Modern Family” or “Glee” in 3D each week.

How fast will 3D TV catch on?

No one can be certain how fast or fully consumers will embrace 3D TVs. Insight Media, a market research firm, has predicted worldwide sales of approximately 3.3 million in 2010 and 36 million in 2014.

Beatty believes that they'll catch on first at places such as businesses, schools and organizations that will employ them for display and educational purposes. As the economy improves, he foresees a sharp rise in the home entertainment market.

“The gamers will want to jump on board first. They'll show it to their friends. Once the parents see it, they'll become hooked. Then it will become a commodity just as color TVs became and how flatscreen TVs became,” he said.

To back up his prediction, Beatty cited two things that work in 3D's favor.

“Americans like to shop. And Americans like to watch TV,” he said. “I think it's really going to take off. I really do.”

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