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Digital Cinema Summit musings

Michael Goldman April 15th, 2007

Today's Digital Cinema Summit (put on by the Entertainment Technology Center at USC) was heavy on the 3D theme and its impact on both the creation of content and the distribution and exhibition of that content. The topic was apropos coming on the heels of Disney's *Meet the Robinsons*—the subject of an afternoon session at the conference. During that session, panel members cited statistics indicating that the 3D version of "Meet the Robinsons" opened on 892 screens simultaneously worldwide, making it, according to them, "the biggest D-cinema release to date."

They point out that such a release is an astounding achievement when one considers there is not yet an official digital cinema file standard, and that putting out a 3D film to so many different venues currently still requires a world of file compatibility and transfer issues to overcome. Yet, ironically, the film whose record "Meet the Robinsons" broke was "300"—released just a few weeks earlier. In other words, this stuff is all breaking out so fast that what is literally a groundbreaking achievement by D-cinema standards today will be kid's stuff compared to what is likely to come tomorrow. Indeed, panel members hardly expect the "Meet the Robinsons" D-cinema release record to last very long.

Earlier, though, in another session, Bill Kinder, director of editorial and post production for Pixar, emphasized that the file compatibility issue has a ways to go before 3D animated releases become simpler to roll out. He reminisced about the 3D release of *Cars*, and pointed out that in those "early" days of just over a year or so ago, even the best experts had a massive headache on their hand moving all those files around to fit different display formats and projection environments. He told the audience how Pixar put together a beautiful JPEG 2000-based version for ShoWest, since the event took place shortly after the announcement of the original digital cinema initiative spec, and how everyone was very pleased with the fruits of that effort. Then, a few weeks later, Pixar needed to build another version for another pre-release screening. Although Pixar successfully pulled off the feat and "controlled our file issues," he said that "we quickly learned that you better ask what kind of hard drive (a particular theater's) server will accept."

Those issues, Kinder and others at the event say, still need to be resolved. Nonetheless, the progress of recent developments was palpable at the event. As Josh Greer, CEO and co-founder of REAL D, the 3D digital cinema purveyors who seemingly play a content creation or distribution role in just about every major 3D feature film release these days, put it: "3D was the red-headed stepchild of digital cinema (until recently). Now, (studio types) return my calls. That's because 3D (for major feature films) now makes economic sense."

And that, he says, is why we'll be seeing a lot more of it in the months and years to come ...

—Michael Goldman



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