

Market Trends: A 3D Perspective from IFA 2011

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I've been involved in the S3D industry since 2004, started working with glasses-free 3D displays from the outset, and I still love it. However, working in this particular industry for so long means that you learn a lot

about eco-systems, market needs and expectations.

Due to investor reasons, expectations of the 3D market were initially so high that it was simply impossible to satisfy them. Indeed although I'm an evangelist for S3D, I was still fairly surprised when it seemed that everyone at CES 2010 was jumping on the S3D bandwagon. Why? Because the eco-system wasn't ready for this rapidly-evolving technology.

It is definitely not a question of glasses-based 3D versus glasses-free 3D. The biggest failure of the display industry was to introduce 3D to consumers that required proprietary and incompatible active glasses solutions. Since passive glasses are common in most 3D cinemas, consumers don't understand why another system is required at home.

Another big issue is a lack of content. Basically, when industry experts talk about content, they are referring to gaming, movies and, more recently, TV channels. This is fair enough, but they are overlooking the importance of user-generated content. Indeed there is a distinct lack of streamlined solutions for consumers to make 3D as easily as 2D home entertainment, and this includes the entire chain from acquisition to display.

The signs from IFA 2011

From what I have seen at IFA (Berlin, 31 August – 5 September 2011), as far as audiences are concerned, 3D is here to stay. Outstanding 3D was continually on show, and industry leaders demonstrated how stereoscopy is as easy as 1-2-3D. Having seemed to learn from their previous mistakes, most of them felt it was important to demonstrate 3D as no-brainer technology, and simply as the evolution of HD and/or mobile entertainment.



Giant 3D videowall at IFA 2011 made of 122 3D TVs.

Passive and autostereoscopic displays

LG put on a brilliant 3D show with a passive 3D display and stylish white glasses and neat clip-on glasses. And that wasn't all. Within its large area, LG outlined the capabilities of its Optimus 3D cell phone, including photography, video and gaming, with the opportunity for attendees to get hands-on with the devices.



Passive clip-on 3D glasses at IFA 2011.

Interestingly, we were able to compare the 3D effect on the glasses-free cell phone display with a passive 3D screen via HDMI output. Despite the low resolution of the cell-phone compared with the passive screen, the 3D on the small display was impressive. From my experience over the past few years in the 3D industry, I believe that LG 's strategy to establish 3D in the market is working well.



Visitors at IFA 2011 in front of a presentation showing 3D synchronised gaming on a glasses-free smartphone and a passive 3D display via HDMI.

A few other companies were also showcasing autostereoscopic devices. Most prominent was Toshiba, with the introduction of a 15" notebook that features a 2D/3D-switchable smart lenticular display using face/eyetracking from SuperD. While it is good to have a glasses-free notebook available, its 3D effect compared with other technologies was not that great. It is unlikely to be used for professional stereoscopic work, and there are better dedicated gaming notebooks on the market, so for the casual user, this notebook may be overpriced.

Toshiba was also showing a glasses-free 3DTV. The technology works well, and Toshiba has clearly put a lot of effort into it, but it is hard to imagine that the average consumer will buy one of these as opposed to an affordable passive 3DTV with cheap glasses.

One of the best autostereoscopic displays I saw was on the Phillips stand. A gigantic 21:9 cinemascope display delivered a stunning multiuser experience. A clever feature of this display is a small LED light which helps you to find the right viewing position easily – often an issue with multiuser 3D displays. Another premium glasses-free 3D experience came as a result of collaboration between Swiss 3D company 3D Impact Media and German TV manufacturer Loewe. However, a few general technical issues have to be solved before either of these TVs are ready for market.

Nonetheless, with affordable high-resolution panels becoming available, once the technical issues have been ironed out, it is just a question of time before glasses-free TV makes its way into the home.



Smartphone with autostereoscopic 3D display at IFA 2011.

Conclusion

For those working on autostereoscopic technologies, James Cameron's recent prediction that 3D will finally take off thanks to glasses-free mobile devices, must be very encouraging.

I believe that he is absolutely right. Entertainment is moving rapidly to mobile devices, and since 3D already works well on small 4-5" glasses-free 3D screens, we can expect the next exciting iteration on high-resolution displays in the 8-10" range. The question is whether OEMs will take advantage of existing improved 3D screens with excellent quality, such as MasterImage 3D, and ditch their own in-house developments.

What would give 3D an immediate boost is if Apple were to come out

with a 3D display for the next generation of iPad. But this is unlikely to happen due to the lack of sufficient mainstream 3D content and a good business model for its distribution.

Before Apple takes the plunge into 3D, OEMs could take advantage and increase their market share by filling the gap, provided they don't make the same mistake of focusing only on hardware. In my opinion, a major reason for the disappointing sales of 3D tablets is the lack of an ecosystem around the devices. Tablets are rich media devices, and the industry needs to come up with creative ideas that deliver a seamless new user experience.

There are some 3D content-related businesses already out there, but they are at any early stage. Even so, there should be a consolidation in order to provide a complete solution for 3D tablet devices. And I'm not saying that by adopting the iTunes paradigm and making it 3D, the industry will be saved in the tablet war. If S3D is that exciting, there has to be something new – otherwise we might be waiting until the next decade for the market to move.

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