

Back to Avatar carries weight of Hollywood's 3-D future on its shoulders

## Avatar carries weight of Hollywood's 3-D future on its shoulders

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Like the film itself, the anticipation and buzz surrounding *Avatar* are heading deep into outer space.

But industry insiders say the sci-fi adventure – Canadian filmmaker James Cameron's first feature-length film since 1997's *Titanic* – is going to do more than entertain audiences; it's going to transform the future of movies.

"There is incredible anticipation, incredible want-to-see. I think (*Avatar*) is a turning point. It's going to change the way people experience movies. To be a part of that is pretty cool," said Greg Foster, chair and president of filmed entertainment for IMAX Corporation, which has worked closely with Cameron on a super-sized version of the film.

IMAX is rolling out a slew of 3-D films in 2010 in anticipation of the swelling popularity *Avatar* is likely to unleash, including *Alice In Wonderland*, *Tron* and a film on the Hubble Space Telescope, with footage shot by space shuttle astronauts using 3-D cameras.

David Wertheimer, CEO and executive director of the Entertainment Technology Center at the University of Southern California, said Cameron's use of newly developed CGI and "stereoscopic" 3-D technologies is going to change audience expectations and spur other filmmakers to follow his lead.

"Whether or not this film does huge numbers at the box office or just okay numbers, Jim Cameron will have moved the industry forward in terms of a new track from an entertainment perspective and greatly accelerated the pace of change and the audience acceptance of 3-D," Wertheimer said.

Since the 1950s, Wertheimer said, 3-D has largely been viewed by audiences and filmmakers as part novelty, part gimmick.

The technology had a resurgence of 3-D in the 1970s and 1980s and even a third wave in recent years, with movies like *My Bloody Valentine* and *Final Destination 4* along with a host of animated films aimed at younger audiences.

The latest wave of 3-D, led by *Avatar*, will guarantee the technology is not only here to stay but ready to reach a new level of respectability, Wertheimer predicted.

The "fundamental leap" in *Avatar* will be Cameron's ability to meld the performances of actors against a highly realistic visual backdrop, he said.

Video games, for example, have been able to replicate the movement of human characters accurately. But giving those characters an emotional life – the flush in the cheeks, the glimmer in the eyes, for example – is what Wertheimer believes Cameron is set to achieve.

"When you look at (video game characters) up close, they don't seem human to you because they don't have that level of realism in the facial features and in the eyes."

"It's that emotional quality that Jim Cameron is really trying to capture in this movie that represents a quantum leap forward in terms of how he's creating the 3-D characters and the 3-D world."

Wertheimer said research done by his centre has already shown attitudes towards 3-D change dramatically once people see films using the latest technology. The future of 3-D will no longer be confined to horror movies or kids' films.

"So *Avatar* will do something really dramatic from that perspective. It will expose a huge group of people to 3-D that have not seen the new 3-D and that will change the landscape," Wertheimer said.

"It will also open up the floodgates in terms of filmmakers saying, 'I want to make my next film in 3-D.'"

Georgia Sourtzis, communications manager for Cineplex Entertainment – Canada's largest exhibitor – said the company will be feeding the hype when it releases an exclusive 76-second clip on its website, [www.cineplex.com](http://www.cineplex.com), sometime Friday.

Cineplex will feature the film in 86 locations nationwide on Dec. 18, including at its three IMAX locations in the GTA. A contest to give away a reserved row of seats on opening day has drawn hundreds of responses.

Sourtzis, who has seen a 20-minute clip, is already sold.

"The graphics were amazing. It really felt that you were in the movie. I was ducking at one point because I felt like (something) was coming at me."