

'Star Wars' goes digital in first commercial test of new cinema technology

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Body

The new "Star Wars" became the first major movie to be shown to the public Friday using a digital projector, a piece of equipment that doesn't use film reels or any celluloid at all.

The showing received a general thumbs up, but some viewers found the image didn't match the quality of old-fashioned film.

Computers and a digital projector replaced the big platters of 35 mm film as "Star Wars Episode I - The Phantom Menace" was screened at a handful of theaters in Los Angeles and New Jersey.

Fans were enthusiastic at a showing at a Pacific Theatres screen in the San Fernando Valley, where the digital version will have a month-long test run.

"The picture was crystal clear, the sound. It was like you're actually in it when the lightsaber battles, the pod races, everything. It was fantastic," said Jonathan Carras, 16.

"Clearly the best picture quality I've ever seen of any film I've ever seen," said Roger Kraemer, 44. "There are no scratches, no spots, no nothing. I mean, it's just basically a perfect picture, and it's just gorgeous."

Professionals were more critical.

The image had flaws due to missing computer data, and the movement was marred by a sort of ultrafast jitteriness known as "crawl," said Ted Fay, director of technology at Santa Monica Studios, which has worked on movies such as "The General's Daughter" and "Godzilla."

"There was this sort of crawliness to the image that isn't natural and is distracting," he said.

"Perhaps people will grow accustomed to it," he added. "I'd take 35 (millimeter) hands down."

Many flaws were from the film itself rather than the digital process, said Steven A. Morley of Qualcomm Inc., a San Diego firm that worked with CineComm of Beverly Hills to create the digital system used for the "Star Wars" rollout.

The digital picture is so sharp that such flaws show up clearly, he said.

Currently, 35 mm film is screened via a movie projector - technology that has essentially changed little since Edison's Kinetoscope in 1891. The digital system is closer to the way images are transferred for video conferencing or over the Internet.

Digital movies can be distributed to theaters by satellite, over fiber-optic cable or on special discs.

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Instead of a film opening in a few major cities and then moving to smaller locations, a satellite could beam it to thousands of theaters at once. If different sound tracks are provided, a theater could switch languages between showings.

And the movie itself never will scratch or wear out.

For "Star Wars," a 35 mm film print was converted to electronic information on a digital tape, which then was transferred into an array of 18 computer hard drives. The data then went to a digital projector, which created a screen image by bouncing light off special computer chips containing more than 1 million microscopic mirrors.

The drawback for such a system is the equipment cost, estimated at \$ 80,000 to \$ 100,000.

However Robert Lemer, senior vice president of CineComm, said the company plans to supply the system for free and make money by charging exhibitors a fee per showing.

He predicted that digital equipment will start going into theaters in 16 to 18 months, with "a couple thousand" installed within two years.

"This is the launch of digital cinema. It's the future," he said.

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