

> BLU-RAY VS. HD-DVD

Blue STEAL

Is Blu-ray winning the high-def disc jam? By Marc Camron



Not another one!

China has announced its own high-definition-disc format, bound to outsell all the others based on that nation's population alone.

DON'T WASTE YOUR POPCORN ON HIGH-DEFINITION VIEWINGS of *Fantastic Four* or *The Devil Wears Prada*. The real entertainment comes from watching the two high-def disc formats—Blu-ray and HD-DVD—slug it out for home-theater supremacy. And the stakes couldn't be higher. Sony is counting on the PlayStation 3 to drive massive market penetration of its Blu-ray format, thus earning a killing in home-movie licensing cash. Microsoft—which released a \$200 movie-playing HD-DVD drive for the Xbox 360 in November—is backing the other team.

So far, manufacturers of stand-alone players have not been forthcoming with sales numbers for either hardware or movies. Bill Hunt, editor of online DVD resource The Digital Bits (www.digitalbits.com), believes that's a sign that both formats are underperforming compared to expectations.

And in this battle, sales numbers—rather than picture quality—mean everything in establishing the dominant format. "There are tiny differences," Hunt says, "but overall, it's a wash. Once you get to the level of 1080p video [the ultra-crisp resolution supported by these discs], both formats deliver."

Seeing blue

Blu-ray player delays and the PS3's low initial release numbers aren't expected to factor much into the format's long-term future. PS3s will continue to be in high demand, and the system easily represents the largest single installed player base, which bodes well for the Blu-ray format. "Blu-ray is in a better position because more people are interested in purchasing a PS3 than in purchasing a stand-alone HD-DVD player," says Wedbush Morgan Securities Analyst Michael Pachter. "That inter-

est will continue for several years. That means that the studios will see a Blu-ray installed base much larger than the HD-DVD installed base, and they will ultimately be compelled to make the best economic decision, which is to support Blu-ray."

At this time, only one studio—Universal—hasn't committed to the Blu-ray format, while HD-DVD has yet to attract Fox, Disney, MGM, Sony, and Lionsgate. Hunt adds that the bigger-name electronics manufacturers, such as Sony, Panasonic, and Pioneer, are still supporting Blu-ray over HD-DVD. Once more titles become available, the higher-quality hardware will likely attract consumers who remain on the fence.

Right now, however, the movie catalogs for both formats are roughly equal. In the middle of December, Amazon.com had 203 HD-DVDs and 196 Blu-ray discs available for sale or preorder. Hunt expects many

significant studio announcements at January's Consumer Electronics Show, with studios increasing the frequency of both new releases and high-profile catalog titles.

Still, you can predict where many high-profile movies will land just based on studio support. Disney blockbusters, such as *Toy Story* and *The Incredibles*, as well as Fox's *Star Wars* saga will likely make their appearance exclusively on Blu-ray. Other hits, such as *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, the *Matrix* films, and the *Indiana Jones* series, should appear on both formats simultaneously, assuming there isn't a clear winner once the studios get around to giving consumers the films they really want. Whether those movies come now or later, Pachter says the outcome will be the same. "Blu-ray wins in a landslide," he says.

Paying the renters

Major video-rental chain Blockbuster isn't ready to side with Blu-ray just yet. The chain's online store carries every title released for both formats, as well as in 250 of its retail locations. "At this time there are about 40 titles in each format in our participating stores," says Blockbuster spokesman Randy Hargrove. "We will move forward based on consumer acceptance."

Mail-order video-rental giant Netflix is adopting a similar stance, offering HD-DVDs and Blue-ray titles as part of its standard subscription plan. "We support both formats and will continue to do so," says spokesman Steve Swasey, "although we wish there was not a format war, since in this case the consumer loses."

Even game developers who work with both standards and Blu-ray discs aren't sold on Sony's format, despite it being the only megastorage disc available on the consoles. (PS3 Blu-ray discs can hold more than five times the content of the standard dual-layered DVDs used by the Xbox 360.) "Most games still use a ton of compression—not just to fit on a disk but to load faster," says Todd Howard, executive producer of Xbox 360 role-playing epic *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*, which is also coming to the PlayStation 3. "So drive speed matters more to me, and Blu-ray is slower." (The PS3 *Oblivion* team compensated for the slower drive by duplicating data across the Blu-ray disc, making it faster to find and load.) "Now, with games that have a lot of prerendered [high-definition] cut-scenes, Blu-ray is key," Howard adds. "Those types of things


eat a lot of disk space. But we tend to stay away from [that type of content] anyway, so it's not much of an issue for us."

Blu-ray's vivid future

Ultimately, the final arbiter in the format fight may go to the one industry that drives technology the most: porn. The backing of the adult video biz, after all, helped determine the outcome of the VHS vs. Betamax battle in the late 1970s, lit the Internet ablaze in the early '90s, and propelled DVD to the title of fastest-selling consumer electronic product

of all time.

And when it comes to adult entertainment in high definition, the future looks blue. Vivid Video, one of the world's top adult entertainment companies (like you don't know who they are) has fired the first volley, committing to its first Blu-ray release—due in early 2007—and deciding to wait a while longer on HD-DVD.

Of course, maybe seeing those adult stars in so-crisp-you-can-see-every-pore-and-pimple high-def isn't such a good thing. Eh, we don't really feel hungry for popcorn anymore. 

DISCS O' TECH

The nuts and bolts of both discs...

BLU-RAY		HD-DVD
\$500/\$600 for the PS3; \$1,000 and up for stand-alone players	PRICE	\$200 for the Xbox 360 add-on; \$400-plus for a stand-alone unit
50GB (dual layer)	STORAGE	30GB (dual layer)
More than 200	NUMBER OF AVAILABLE MOVIES FOR 2006	More than 200
Up to 1080p	RESOLUTION	Up to 1080p
Sony, Matsushita (Panasonic), Philips	CORPORATE BACKERS	Toshiba, NEC
Sony, Panasonic, Philips/Magnavox, LG, Mitsubishi, Pioneer, Samsung, Sharp	HARDWARE MANUFACTURERS	Toshiba, Sanyo, Onkyo, Kenwood, Mitsubishi
Sony (Columbia Tri-Star and MGM), 20th Century Fox, Disney, Paramount, Warner Bros.	STUDIO SUPPORT	Universal, Paramount, Warner Bros.
 <i>X-Men: The Last Stand, The Wild, Kingdom of Heaven, Pearl Harbor, Alien vs. Predator, Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby, The Princess Bride</i>	BEST FLICKS TO SHOW IT OFF (SO FAR)	 <i>King Kong, Batman Begins, Serenity, Apollo 13, Miami Vice, The Bourne Supremacy, U-571, The Adventures of Robin Hood</i>

PLAYER VS. PLAYER

Wired magazine AV-gear reviewer Daniel Dumas pits PS3 against Xbox 360...



The 360 HD-DVD player

After an easy set-up and navigation via the familiar Xbox 360 dashboard, flicks like *Serenity* and *The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift* played lag-free even when in-movie special features were activated. Colors, however, were slightly muddled and fine details were a little fuzzier compared to other HD-DVD drives.

Bottom line: Among the worst players out there, but what do you expect for only \$200? (Stand-alone units cost twice that.)



The PS3 Blu-ray player

The image quality is fantastic—sharper than the 360's HD-DVD counterpart. After subjecting ourselves to the hellish landscapes of *Silent Hill* and (shudder) *Little Man*, the color contrasts were nigh flawless—you could almost feel blood splattering in your face. Still, the interface suffers from Sony's counter-intuitive layout, but it's definitely improved from the PS2 as a movie player.

Bottom line: A good player compared to stand-alone units.