Behind the Screens

Mickey Mouse idea

Disney’s encrypted DVD “screeners” plan is doomed in an industry full of technophobes and freebie lovers.

By James Bates, Times Staff Writer

If you want to see a noble effort doomed to failure, look no further than a recent announcement aimed at keeping “Chicken Little” and “The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe” out of the hands of street vendors in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

For anti-piracy reasons, the Walt Disney Co. is mailing out encrypted DVD “screeners” of the movies it’s pushing for Oscar consideration. These discs can only be viewed with a special player developed by a Dolby Laboratories unit called Cinea.

These are the same special DVD players that have been gathering dust in the garages of Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences members since last year, when they were sent out in an effort that had to be aborted due to production delays.

The Cinea device works like a key to unlock the movie so it can be viewed, and any bootleg versions can be traced to the machine that played it. It goes beyond the watermarking method that can help track leaks via an electronic fingerprint.

All you have to do is set up the player is plug the thing in, then register it online or via phone.

That sounds easy, and it probably is. But it violates one basic entertainment industry rule: Don’t ask people in Hollywood to do the kinds of tasks most of us accept as routine.

In Hollywood, your stature is inversely proportionate to your everyday drudgery. Always make an assistant place phone calls. When vacationing with children, adhere to the “no nanny left behind” rule.

To its credit, Cinea is trying to make it as easy as possible. If you are afraid of electrocuting yourself when you reach for the electrical octopus behind the TV, there are tech support people you can call. They promise they can get someone out to assist you in 24 to 48 hours, faster than any cable guy I’ve dealt with.

But one can envision the scenes playing out in Bel-Air and the Malibu Colony, where people vote absentee so they don’t have to drive to the polls like the rest of us. To register your machine, it must be readily available, “as this is a time-sensitive process,” the instructions say. Uh-oh.

You need to have the remote control handy, and “if the player is not in the same room as the computer you are working at, you should have a pen and paper available.” And “if the player is not in the same location as you, you will need to complete registration another time, from that location.”

Let’s chuck it and drive to the ArcLight. Getting a critical mass of these folks to hook up another DVD player, let alone register it, just to watch a limited pool of screeners seems a stretch.

Factor in some laziness, technophobia, a relatively old demographic and a desire by many academy members to screen the films while on vacation in Aspen or St. Bart’s, and a studio Oscar campaign turns into Dennis J. Kucinich trolling for votes.

So why would Disney stick its neck out? It might not be such a tough question.

Some rivals suggest the Weinstein-less company doesn’t seem to have a deep well of Oscar-level films this year, which Disney denies.
But the studio has no big CGI classic from Pixar, and the Disney announcement doesn't include films from its Miramax group, which usually provides the company with most of its Oscar juice each year.

In addition, under new Chief Executive Bob Iger, technology is now the Disney mantra. Disney wants to take every opportunity to show it is a tech-friendly guardian of the sacred copyright.

Cinea says other studios will join in, but my admittedly unscientific poll found little enthusiasm. Some studios quietly canvassed academy members and concluded that not enough would bother hooking the machine up.

Cinea Vice President Laurence Roth counters that registration is strong for the 12,000 players sent out, but he wouldn't give numbers.

As an incentive, the academy also mailed copies of last year's Oscar-winning animated short film "Ryan" — copies that would only play on a registered Cinea machine.

Roth said he hopes more studios will join Disney by the time the Oscar season is in full swing. However, with the first batch of screeners going out, it already seems too late.

You won't hear studios trash Cinea's efforts out loud, because being against any effort to combat piracy in Hollywood these days is like saying people shouldn't be allowed to drive a Prius alone in the carpool lane. But some studios are quietly exploring other alternatives.

Also, there are a lot of people — directors, purists, critics and some influential academy members — who never liked the campaign-via-video trend and believe "March of the Penguins" plays better at the multiplex. In a letter to academy members about the Cinea system, President Sid Ganis ended with "P.S.: The DVDs are fine … but go to the movies, it's even better."

My guess is the bigger reason the Cinea system won't catch on is because of the role screeners play in Hollywood. Ostensibly, they exist so you can more easily watch Philip Seymour Hoffman in "Capote," to see what the fuss is all about.

In reality, they let you build up — for free — a great home film library to play on your own private DVD. And if there's anything that's really sacred in Hollywood, it's freebies.

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