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Home Movies on DVD: Digi-Memories

May 13, 2002

Whether they've been collecting dust in the closet for many years or just a few, most of us don't pull out home movies till a life event — like a wedding or the birth of a child — causes us to reminisce about previous, similar times. But if you've pulled out those old films, you know that stringing old super-8 or 16mm film through a long-unused projector just ain't no fun. Even for camcorder-using parents, searching through a stack of poorly marked videotapes looking for that shot from Timmy's fifth birthday can tax patience.



Back in the 1990s, many forward-thinking older folks (like my parents) spent a small fortune and simply converted hours and hours of super-8 footage onto video, carefully cataloging them — thinking they'd have something that would last for years. Well, thanks to the advent of DVD and the rapid demise of VHS, many are now wondering, "Why didn't we just wait?"

In response, some hearty souls have picked up products like ADS Technologies's [USB Instant DVD](#), plugged into their computers and converted the videos to DVD themselves. However, this can be a complicated and costly process, so many consumers choose (or, with old films, have no choice) a more conservative route, such as getting a service to do it for them.

A quick search of the Internet will tell you that business for these conversion houses is booming: A recent Google search for "video to DVD" got 4330 hits. Many offer to plant your old, scratchy home films and videos onto crisp, clear, long-lasting digital discs. At prices averaging anywhere from \$35 to \$75 per hour of video, these boasts sound awfully tempting. But like any suddenly appealing product, there are as many advantages to be found as pitfalls to avoid.

Some advantages are genuine. "[The DVD services] can actually do a little bit of clean-up on the audio and video and, in some cases, it looks better than it originally did on your tapes or on your film," says **Jim Taylor**, author of [DVD Demystified](#) (McGraw-Hill, Dec. 2000). However, despite some companies' promises of turning super-8 coal into digital diamonds, their ability to clean up images at a reasonable price is fairly limited. Most services are automated and, unless you want to spend a year's salary, the most they can do is clarify images that look either too bright or too dark. "Obviously [the company] can't have somebody sit there and color-correct your stuff by hand and make any money at it," adds Taylor. "They do noise reduction [which can sharpen the picture] and some automated light/dark correction, and a few other things like that."

One DVD feature — something called "chapter stops" — may offer you the biggest net gain over VHS tapes. Basically, chapter stops are markers set at predetermined points over the course of the entire disc — usually every five to ten minutes — that divide it into viewable chunks, each with a descriptive title like "John's Wedding" or "Courtney's Birthday." This way, you can simply look at the menu that appears when you insert the disc into the player and decide which segment you want to watch. You no longer have to sit or fast forward through the entire video to see a specific piece of

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footage. As with Hollywood movies on DVD, you just pick and click.

"One of the big advantages of converting your video content to DVD is... instant access," says Taylor. "And instant access is much more usable *if* they do scene detection so that you can jump to new scenes on the video." In other words, be sure the service you choose offers the capability to divide these chapters logically — not all do. "Some don't even *do* chapter marks," warns Taylor. "Others just put a chapter mark every five minutes," which will drop you at arbitrary points during the video — most likely in the middle of a particular segment, like a birthday party, instead of at its start.

Other features include adding music, a case with a full-color cover, editing the footage, and a strange variety of others (like still or motion menus) — all of which, of course, cost extra. When considering the switch, though, there are other considerations.

"This is early adopter stuff here," says **Stephen Muratore**, editor-in-chief of *Videomaker* magazine. "You have to be prepared for *some* disappointment." What he means is that, despite the many pluses, the technology of DVDs is still in its infancy. In fact, as many tech watchers know, there are currently at least five different types of recordable DVD discs, none of which play on all DVD players.

"Probably one of the biggest things that consumers have to worry about is compatibility," says Taylor. Most DVDs purchased from services like these use DVD-R — the mostly widely compatible type — but even those are readable on only about 85% of players. Adds Taylor: "Some places will send you a test disc ahead of time for you to try on your player to see if it works. Others will give you a money-back guarantee." That, of course, is assuming the service is completely reputable. "And then others [will] say, 'Oh well, sorry! It's not compatible. There's nothing we can do.'" And you're stuck.

Disc quality may also be an issue. "That's something for people to ask the services about: Whether they use high-quality, name-brand media or they use cheap stuff," says Taylor. "And partly that's going to [be noticeable in the] price. If you're paying really, really low prices for this stuff, you're probably getting really cheap media. And you may be sorry."

Eventually, notes Muratore, the issues of compatibility will be resolved, but probably not for a while. "In two or three years, [DVDs] will be compatible and reliable and you won't have to worry about it." However, in the meantime, perhaps it might be smarter to keep your memories right where they are. — *Tom Penketh*




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