

The Good, Bad and Ugly of Movie Downloading – By David Pogue – The New York Times – 2/21/08

Ten days ago, Netflix announced that it would abandon HD DVD, Toshiba's entry in the high-definition DVD format war. Six days ago, Wal-Mart dropped HD DVD, too. Then two days ago, Toshiba surrendered, marking the end of the most pointless format war since Betamax-VHS.

Like a handful of similar devices, the Xbox360 connects your TV to a catalog of shows and movies, but good luck watching them.

Man, if they have Friday beer bashes over at Toshiba, this week's will be a real downer.

Why did so many companies dump HD DVD so fast? Intriguingly, one often-cited reason is the approaching era of Internet movie downloads. The logic goes like this: as long as there's a format war, consumers won't buy DVD players of either type. By settling on a single format — it doesn't really matter which one — the movie and electronics industries can at least start milking the remaining years of the DVD's life.

In fact, though, the Internet movie download era is more distant than pundits think, for four colossal reasons.

First, downloadable movies require high-speed Internet connections — and only about half of American households have them. That number won't change much for years.

Second, downloaded movies don't include the director's commentaries, deleted scenes, alternate endings, alternate language soundtracks or other DVD goodies. It's just not as rich an experience.

Third, movie downloads don't deliver the audio and video quality of DVD discs — even standard-def ones. Internet movies are compressed to download faster, which affects picture quality, and offer older, more compressed audio soundtracks than modern DVDs. (Check out the astounding quality-comparison photos at <http://tinyurl.com/3e488m> for details.)

Finally, today's movie-download services bear the greasy policy fingerprints of the movie studio executives — and when it comes to the new age of digital movies, these people are not, ahem, known for their vision.

For example, no matter which movie-download service you choose, you'll find yourself facing the same confusing, ridiculous time limits for viewing. You have to start watching the movie you've rented within 30 days, and once you start, you have to finish it within 24 hours.

Where's the logic? They've got your money, so why should they care if you start watching on the 30th day or the 31st?

Then there is the 24-hour limit. Suppose you typically do not start a movie until 7:30 p.m., after dinner and the homework have been put away. If you do not have time to finish the movie in one sitting, you cannot resume at 7:30 tomorrow night; at that point, the download will have self-destructed.

What would the studios lose by offering a 27-hour rental period? Or three days, or even a week? Nothing. In fact, they'd attract millions more customers. (At the very least, instead of just

deleting itself, the movie should say: “Would you like another 24-hour period for an additional \$1?”)

Then there’s the fact that to protect their cash cows, most studios don’t release their movies on the Internet until a month after they’ve been available on DVD.

Despite these limitations, plenty of companies are staking out property on the digital-download frontier. Some deliver movies to your computer screen, which will never appeal to anybody but nerds; virtually nobody gathers the family ‘round the old Dell on movie night.

Several boxes, however, deliver movies straight to your TV, usually for \$3 to \$5 each. Here are their report cards.

Apple TV (\$230). Thanks to a free software upgrade, Apple’s sleek little box has taken on a whole new life. It now connects directly to the iTunes store — no computer needed. Movies are stored on the Apple TV’s internal hard drive.

Standard-def movies begin to play only a few seconds after you’ve selected them; you watch the beginning while the rest is downloading. High-def movies take several minutes to begin playing.

In a couple of years, Apple TV may be the box to beat. The movie store is fun to navigate, picture quality is high and wireless networking is built-in, unlike its rivals. You can buy episodes from any of 650 TV series on demand (usually \$2 an episode, no ads), which its competitors can’t touch. Finally, of course, the Apple TV does a lot of other stuff; it can display all the music, pictures and movies from your Mac or PC and play podcasts and videos from the Web.

But the Apple TV movie store’s shelves look a little bare. Fewer than 1,000 movies are available, and only 100 are in high definition; compare with the 90,000 titles offered by Netflix on DVD, 900 in high-def. (Apple points out that its store’s music catalog started out tiny, too — 200,000 songs, compared with 6 million today.) There are some silly bugs in the debut software, too.

Instant gratification: A-. Selection: D. Overall movie joy: B.

TiVo/Amazon Unbox (\$100 and up, plus monthly fee). Here’s another box whose original purpose was something other than movie downloads. But among its blossoming portfolio of video features, TiVo lets you rent or buy movies downloaded from Amazon.com’s Unbox service.

At least you no longer have to order these movies at Amazon.com (although you can, using your Mac or PC, if you prefer to type movie titles with a real keyboard instead of fussing with on-screen alphabets). You can do the whole transaction right from the couch.

Show time is not instantaneous, either; on high-def TiVos, you can’t start watching until 10 minutes after you order, and on older models, you have to wait for the whole movie to download (1 to 5 hours). Selection is still slim: 3,200 movies are available to rent; 4,700 available to buy. None are in high definition.

Instant gratification: B-. Selection: C. Overall movie joy: B-.

Xbox 360 (\$350 and up). Yet again, here's a box whose movie service isn't the primary attraction (here, it's games). In this case, though, the movie thing isn't just secondary — it's way, way down the list.

You have to watch movies within 14 days, not 30. The remote control isn't designed for video playback. You pay using a confusing system of Microsoft "points," which you must buy in \$5 increments. And although there are plenty of TV shows available, only 300 movies are in the catalog at any given time, about half in high definition.

Instant gratification: A-. Selection: D. Overall movie joy: D.

Vudu (\$300). This compact black box comes loaded with the beginnings of 5,000 movies. When you rent or buy one, therefore, playback begins instantly. About 20 new movies arrive on the box each week, pushing older ones off the 250-gigabyte hard drive.

Vudu is the only dedicated movie box. The interface is pure and clean, picture quality is tops and the remote has only four buttons (plus a terrific scroll wheel).

On the downside, many of those 5,000 movies are pure direct-to-video dreck (anyone for "San Franpsycho" tonight?). Confusingly, movies on the list come and go according to Vudu's deals with the studios. And you need a pretty fast connection; basic DSL subscribers need not apply.

Instant gratification: A. Selection: B+. Overall movie joy: B+.

When competing with the humble DVD, Internet movie boxes do poorly on price, selection and viewing flexibility (that is, how much time you have to watch). Their sole DVD-smashing feature is the convenience; you get the movie right now.

Meanwhile, other sources of instant movie gratification are emerging. Comcast, the nation's largest cable TV company, offers 1,000 on-demand movies each month, many of them free; by year's end, it intends to increase that number to 6,000 (half in high-def) — and you don't have to buy a special box.

The point is that the whole Internet-movies thing is still in its fumbling, bumbling infancy; someday, we'll look at these limited-selection, limited-time services and laugh.

In the meantime, congratulations to Blu-ray, the winning next-generation DVD format. Clearly, spinning silver discs will remain the dominant movie-delivery method for years to come.