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Archos AV 700 Mobile DVR

A digital TV recorder that you can unplug and take with you

By WILSON ROTHMAN

Archos' current motto is "On The Go" but it should be "For Tech's Sake." Everything the French firm creates seems to be more proof of concept than mass market gadget. It was among the first to launch a hard-drive based MP3 player, and it beat everyone to market with portable video. Now it promises a mobile digital video recorder, that is, a TiVo—and TV—that you can unplug and take with you.

Is it for real? Yes. Is it ready for prime time? Maybe not. First, the good: There's a 40GB hard drive nestled behind an impressive 7-in. LCD screen. (For \$200 more, you can get a 100GB version.) Though surprisingly slender, it's larger than any portable game system. The video-grabbing apparatus is actually a separate piece of hardware that you plug in on top of the unit, and it has video input as well as output, so you can watch what you're doing on a regular TV screen. The breakout box also has a jack for an infrared wire, for use in changing channels on your cable box or VCR.

The DVR capabilities are a little overblown. For instance, you don't get an electronic programming guide that helps you sift through the next week's worth of digital cable programming. However, if you already know when your shows come on, you can program them in rather easily by entering dates and times to start and stop recording.

I found the recordings themselves to be of tolerable quality, not just watchable on the AV 700's own screen, but even good-looking on my 42-in. widescreen TV. To play recordings back out to a TV requires that extra piece of hardware, which got a little messy.

That's really just the beginning of the downside. Worse is that this is far from easy to use. The buttons on the unit make very little sense, even to someone who's been around his fair share of electronic devices (ahem). There's four-button directional pad, but there's no "OK" button in the middle. It had Play/Pause and Stop, but it didn't have any clearly marked volume buttons nor anything clearly marked for fast-forwarding and rewinding. (To find these controls you have to push buttons at random, which can lead to unpleasant situations.) The AV 700's remote control is even worse. If not for the fact that it does have clearly marked volume buttons, I'd say it was the most confusing remote I've ever seen.

There are countless other reasons why this product will remain a geek's toy, but I wanted to praise it as a symbol of the devil-may-care spirit of Archos innovation. I don't think the company ever wanted to overtake Apple, or even Creative and iRiver, in the race for most popular music player. Instead, it keeps refocusing its attention on the next crazy thing. What will Archos introduce next? A portable HDTV player? A terabyte pocket drive? Whatever happens, all I can say is: Godspeed, Archos. Godspeed.
