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DVDs - Now Playing Near You

James Turner, Special to The Christian Science Monitor

BOSTON— Just as CD players and CD-ROM drives have become standard equipment in audio and computer packages, a new technology has come along that makes CDs look almost primitive.

The DVD (digital videodisc or digital versatile disc) promises a new era of high-resolution movies and enhanced computer games.

While the same size as a CD, a DVD holds 25 times as much data because it uses both sides of the disc. DVDs also squeeze data more tightly onto the disc and place two layers of information on each side.

With all that extra data, DVDs can store video - which requires lots of storage space - in addition to audio (another space hog for your computer) and computer data.

The discs provide a new level of movie quality and sound to the home market.

DVDs for your TV

Right now, consumers can purchase a DVD player that hooks up to their television for about \$500. The players allow you to watch DVD movies with Dolby Digital five-channel sound.

But if you view a DVD movie on a traditional TV, you're missing out on the real sizzle of this new technology.

That's because the set you have today only displays 544 lines of vertical resolution, while DVD can deliver up to 1,024 lines.

DVD, however, still offers better quality video on your TV and far superior sound compared with traditional videotape. It also allows a choice of screen size formats (full TV-screen or the squeezed down "letter box" shape).

And DVDs retain the resilience of CDs to damage - no more tangled tapes - according to Chris Kukshel, a product-marketing manager at Creative Labs, Inc., in Milpitas, Calif.

The company sells DVD-ROM drives used for multimedia computer systems.

DVD-ROMs provide the highest quality picture - better than regular DVDs.

When you connect a DVD-ROM drive to your PC, you can watch movies on your monitor. (So if your considering a move to a new computer monitor, DVDs support the bigger-is-better argument.)

Equipment for DVD-ROMs

If all this sounds like a good candidate for your next technology purchase, you'll also need a MPEG-2 decoder board, which takes some of load off your computer's main processor.

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MPEG is what squeezes an entire movie onto one DVD, and without a decoder board, your PC must do all the decompression. Most can't.

The good news is that this set up won't break the bank.

Diamond Multimedia of San Jose, Calif., packages a DVD-ROM drive and MPEG-2 decoder for about \$300. The system also plays CDs and CD-ROMs.

Creative sells a similar package for the same price.

Add a good set of speakers and a 21-inch monitor, and you've got a killer multimedia setup.

Not ready for prime time

Mr. Kukshstel doesn't see the PC becoming the primary entertainment center anytime soon, however. "We've always said that someone isn't going to drag their monitor into the living room," he says.

Kukshstel says that consumers will probably set up their PC as a secondary location for movies, although he sees an eventual merger of the PC and the entertainment center.

The increased capacity of DVD-ROMs also lets computer-game makers add more graphics and cinematic footage to their products. "You'll see games [contained] on one disc instead of five," says Kukshstel.

And while only 40 to 50 games are available for DVD, many more should be out by Christmas, he says. "Game designers need to figure out how to use the technology effectively."

Region codes

There is one big gotcha with DVD movies, however. The movie industry has created a series of region codes, with the US and Canada in Region 1, Europe and Japan in Region 2, etc.

Every DVD player and DVD-ROM drive receives a region code based on where it is sold. Movie distributors can control movie release locations by restricting them to specific regions.

So if your friend in France sends you a DVD he bought there, you may not be able to play it here.

Kukshstel says region coding will be primarily used for first-run movies, so it may not be an issue for older material reissued on DVD.

Because DVD-ROM drives are compatible with CD-ROMs, and because DVD will likely become an essential element to multimedia systems sooner rather than later, buying a DVD-ROM for your computer now makes some sense.

But the price on stand-alone DVD players should drop over the next year or so, and since today's TV sets can't use all of the improved video quality, you may want to wait to buy one for your living room.

The Next Generation In Home Movies

Among the features of digital videodiscs (DVDs):

- * Better video and audio quality. Dolby Digital audio brings sound that is nothing short of amazing, and high resolution video delivers images that are startlingly clear.
- * Increasing supply of titles.
- * Decreasing prices.
- * Compact storage. DVDs are much smaller than video cassettes.

* DVD players also play your music CDs as well as CD-ROMs for your computer.

* For personal computers, DVDs offer megastorage: 13 gigabytes - more than that on most personal computers.

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