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James Turner

Tired of paying late fees? New service offers video rental by mail.

Two words STRIKE dread in the hearts of movie renters: late fees.

I often start out with the best of intentions, assuring myself that I'll return a video rental the next day. But before you know it, I've been hit with penalties that sometimes total more than the movie would have cost to buy.

Thankfully, a website, [www.netflix.com](http://www.netflix.com), has come along to save the day.

The service is simple: Pay \$20 a month and list online the DVDs you want to watch. Netflix then sends you via first-class mail as many as three DVDs at a time. Keep them as long as you want, and then return them in a prepaid mailer included.

Once the disc is returned, the company automatically ships out the next title on your list. You'll also get handy e-mail reminders that let you know when titles have been shipped or returned.

Netflix claims four-day average delivery time (business days, of course). My first batch of rentals arrived a bit quicker, with two arriving three days after ordering, and one the next day.

The service offers more than 10,000 titles and has excellent tools to help find the ones you want to watch (including user reviews to help you sort the wheat from the chaff). A well-designed recommendation service helps you pick films based on how you've rated previous movies.

Avid movie renters can check out as many as eight films at once. The monthly fee, however, reaches nearly \$40. Those who only rent movies occasionally can pay as little as \$14 per month to have two movies out at a time.

Those who sign up for the \$20 plan should be able to rent nine to 12 titles a month, assuming the DVDs are returned quickly. If so, you'll end up paying about \$2 per rental, far below the \$4 the megachains charge.

If you're an impulse video renter, or don't own a DVD player, this service is not for you. (Netflix doesn't offer rentals on VHS tapes.)

A few complaints: Double-disc movies count as two rentals, and you may have to wait a bit longer for popular titles. But compared with having to face the music at the video-store counter for tardiness, it's a small price indeed.

James Turner is a computer consultant and avid Web surfer.

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