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A look at the legacy of the VCR

Help Desk

By Al Gordon

When the last VCR heads off to the great consumer electronics graveyard in the sky, will its digital clock display still be blinking zeros?

VCRs are a technology on the cusp of obsolescence. They probably would have been history already were it not for the inability of the electronics industry to agree on a common standard for DVD recording — a battle that is continuing into high-definition TV. As it slowly fades from the marketplace, the VCR will leave as a legacy a surprising number of changes in modern life — everything from setting legal precedents to changing the way people watch TV shows and the nature of the shows themselves.

The U.S. Supreme Court's 1984 ruling in *Sony v. Universal* (popularly known as the "Betamax Case") held that the entertainment industry's copyrights were not infringed when consumers taped TV shows. Copyright law allows for "fair use" of copyrighted materials — this is how public libraries are allowed to loan books — and a 5-4 majority of the justices concluded that "time shifting" TV shows was a fair use. The decision remains to this day the controlling doctrine on the issue of electronic reproduction of copyrighted materials.

Time shifting, meanwhile, proved to have a more far-reaching impact on the entertainment industry than either it or the high court could know in 1984. In that era, the phrase "appointment television" had been coined to describe the idea that a successful TV show would lead viewers to arrange their lives so as to avoid missing an episode. This is now a quaint concept in the era of "on demand" viewing. Because of VCRs, we rearrange the TV schedule to fit our lives instead of vice versa.

One unanticipated consequence of this has been a change in the nature of programming itself. A growing list of programs such as "The Sopranos," "24," or "Lost" weave elaborate plot lines through intricately interlinked episodes. If you missed last week's show, you

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will have trouble following this week's edition. This approach is viable only because viewers can use recordings or on-demand repeats to catch episodes they missed.

Of course, it wasn't just the entertainment industry that was changed by the VCR; consumer electronics changed as well. A key milestone here was the Beta-VHS format war. Sony's Beta format was derived from well-established technology it sold to the broadcast industry and other video professionals. Scores of treatises have been written on why Beta lost out to VHS, which many think was not as technically elegant. Part of it was truly low-tech: VHS cassettes were bigger, so they held more tape and thus could support longer recording times.

But another key element was the licensing terms for the competing technologies. The good aspect of this for consumers was that the standard tied to lower prices and higher sales — VHS — won out over Beta's premium-pricing model. Not so good for consumers was the fact that they were the pawns in this marketing struggle.

Finally, no discussion of the VCR would be complete without mentioning the infamous blinking-clock problem. It has been seen wrongly as evidence of consumer technophobia. Actually, it was a case of bad industrial design that sadly has become all too prevalent in the electronics industry.

Good industrial design results in products that consumers instinctively know how to use. When you get into the driver's seat of a car, you pretty much know that you are supposed to turn the big round thing in front of you and you most likely would intuit that turning it left more than likely will cause the car to go left. Bad design, on the other hand, leaves you clueless — and really bad design leaves you clueless even after you read the manual. All too often, that was the case with VCRs — a situation made even worse by the manufacturers' penchant for constantly redesigning and rearranging their controls.

Most consumers eventually came to terms with VCRs and learned how to tape their favorite shows. But the fact that the devices were big sellers even when consumers were still struggling to figure out how to use them set an unfortunate precedent. Simplicity and ease of use no longer were essential to sales, and a slew of annoying products have plagued us ever since.

Al Gordon is a Massachusetts-based media and political consultant who also writes about technology. You can read more of his articles at www.algordon.com/techblog.html and e-mail him at eagle@algordon.com.

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100 Turnpike Street, North Andover, MA 01845 978-946-2000
