

'Video headphones' still have major geek factor

By Al Gordon
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A little advice for those checking out the leading edge of consumer electronics: stay away from mirrors.

I was starting to test the new MyVu goggles/viewer system for iPod when I caught a glimpse of myself in a hall mirror. To my shock, I looked like a refugee from a science fiction flick. To be specific, I appeared to be a Star Trek conventioner emulating LeVar Burton's Geordi La Forge character in the Next Generation series. Geordi is blind and "sees" with the help of images generated by a wraparound visor that he wears over his eyes.

Which is pretty much the concept of MyVu.

Westwood-based MicroOptical Corporation has been developing "personal media viewers" - think: headphones for video - for some time. Its latest model is optimized for the iPod, combining a viewer, earplug-type headphones, a battery pack/case for your iPod, and a remote control to run it all. The particularly big deal about it is that it is priced at \$299 -below most competitors and the same price as Bose Quiet Comfort 2 headphone, which currently sets the bar for what the market of well-heeled toy addicts will pay for high-end iPod accessories.

I like the concept of MyVu. It is about as comfortable to wear as a pair of designer sunglasses and the earplugs give decent sound isolation. The effect is very much like watching a TV set suspended in the air a few feet in front of you. MicroOptical says the picture is akin to a 27-inch TV from 6 feet away. I thought it wasn't quite that big, more like a 20-inch set a little more distant.

But let's not quibble. The point is that when traveling MyVu lets you watch videos while sitting normally in your seat and without having to find some way to cradle your player so you can watch. It certainly is a better experience than squinting at most of today's portable video player screens, most especially the 3-inch screen on a video iPod.

The iPod MyVu has other helpful touches. The battery pack, which is rechargeable from AC outlets and cigarette lighters, extends battery life for video playing to six hours, about triple that of the iPod's internal batteries.

One key downside is that there is no focus adjustment so that if you need glasses, you will have to perch your MyVu over them or buy corrective lenses from MicroOptical. Another downside is that this is early-generation technology. Experience teaches us that future products surely will have more features at lower prices. Many users who would be comfortable with the current price might still want to hold out for a device with a larger perceived screen size.

Perhaps the biggest downside, though, is that, well, call me self-conscious, but I'm not sure I am ready to look like that much of a geek when I am on an airplane.

This is an ongoing downside of leading edge technology. Eventually the idea of "headphones for video" will be commonplace. But early on you are going to look weird.

But take heart. Remember the first time you used a wireless hands-free cellphone headset or saw someone using one? You remember. Walking down the street, loudly talking and gesturing to a conversationalist who was not present except on your phone line. People staring at you oddly, wondering if perhaps they ought to be calling the mental health department.

Now nobody thinks you are a potential psychotic anymore. They are too busy gesturing and talking on their own headsets.

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