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Put Videotaped Memories on DVD Before It's Too Late

August 20- September 3, 2008

By Mike Wendland

In the back of a storage closet in a spare bedroom at my home is a box filled with videotapes. They chronicle pretty much the birth-to-teen years of my kids, with lots of family vacations, holiday recordings, old TV shows and high school football games.

You too?

In the 1980s and '90s, VHS tapes and VCRs were found in nearly every home across the United States. Like typewriters and film cameras, they're almost relics.

Today, VHS is outdated technology and DVD is now the preferred video format.

But don't think you can indefinitely keep that old box of tapes. VHS tape deteriorates over time. If you don't do something, those memories are in danger of disappearing.

So the question is: How do we transfer all those tapes over to DVD, so we can watch them on our computers and TV sets?

There are commercial places that will do this for you.

A company called DVD Productions (video-on-dvd.com) charges \$35 for transferring 60 minutes of VHS video. A site called iMemories (www.imemories.com) will transfer a single two-hour VHS tape to DVD for \$19.99. Ritz Camera (www.ritzdvd.com) charges \$29.95 for two tapes, or two hours total.

You also can check telephone books and find local brick-and-mortar companies that offer VHS-to-DVD transfer services.

D-I-Y VIDEO

And you can do it yourself. If you have a huge stack of tapes, that's the solution I recommend.

The easy way is to buy a DVD/VCR recorder. You simply insert your VHS tape into one end of the box and a blank, writeable DVD in the other. Hit play on the tape and the analog is converted to digital and burned to DVD. Samsung makes a DVD recorder/VCR combo (DVD-VR357) that sells for \$89 (look online).

You also can get a program and hardware tool called VHS to DVD 3.0, available online from \$59 to \$79. It consists of conversion software and a capture box/converter that connects your VCR or VHS camcorder to your computer.

I warn you up front: This can be pretty involved. But if you can follow instructions and have some patience, you indeed can copy your videotapes to a format that will play over your home DVD player or computer.

A TRICKIER SOLUTION

If you have a digital camcorder, you can attach the red, white and yellow cables that came with your camcorder into the correspondingly colored outputs on the VCR machine. Hit play on the VCR, record on the digital camcorder and after you've recorded the old tape, you can use a FireWire cable or USB 2.0 to output the digital images from the camcorder to your computer.

Confused? Well, if so, that's because it is confusing. For more detailed instructions, type in the keywords "How to convert VHS to DVD" on the www.howtodothings.com Web site.

There's no way around this: Transferring analog video to digital video can be a very time-consuming process. The time required for decoding and converting will vary depending upon the speed of your computer and the level of detail in the tape you're copying. But a couple of hours is probably minimum for a 60-minute VHS tape.

And don't expect great quality. The older the VHS tape is, the more glitch-prone you'll find it, with hits and frame drops and video static.

But no matter what approach you take, you're wise in getting that old VHS video converted to a DVD as soon as possible. It was important enough to record and save; you'll want to preserve it.

A SHORT HISTORY OF VHS TAPE

The first domestic videocassette recorders were launched in the early 1970s, but it was not until the Japanese systems, Sony's Beta (1975) and JVC's VHS, were launched, that videotape moved into the mass market, resulting in what came to be known as the format wars.

VHS finally won, mainly because of its longer recording time compared to Beta. VHS is still the leading consumer VCR format, since follow-ups S-VHS and D-VHS never caught up on popularity. It has, however, lost the battle against the nonlinear and disc-based DVD, and probably will become obsolete in the next few years.

TECH TERMS

- ANALOG: The traditional method of adapting radio and electronic signals so they can carry information. AM (amplitude modulation) and FM (frequency modulation) are the two most common analog systems. Analog largely has been replaced by digital technologies, which are more secure, more efficient and provide better quality.

- DIGITAL: Digital information is stored using a series of ones and zeros. Computers are digital machines because they can read information only as on or off - 1 or 0. This method of computation can be used to represent incredible amounts of data. CDs and DVDs can be used to store and play back high-quality sound and video even though they consist entirely of ones and zeros.

- VHS: Video home system

- VCR: Videocassette recorder

- DVD: Digital video disc