

Samsung DVD-H40

You know I can't hear you when the TV's spooling By Stephen Ballantyne

Samsung DVD-H40E. \$1499

It's a simple idea with obvious commercial potential: time shifting (recording programmes to watch at a more convenient time) is a popular use of VCRs; VCRs are on the way out because their picture quality and ease of use doesn't match that of DVDs; therefore what the world needs is a DVD player that can time shift.

Enter Samsung's DVD-H40E. By adding a tuner and a hard disk to a DVD player, they've made a device that can time shift and play DVDs (indeed, playing DVDs is almost secondary to the timeshifting function.) Well, how hard is that?

But reflect for a moment, and you'll realise that a tuner and a hard disk aren't enough to store a video signal – you also need something like a computer's video card, to convert analogue TV signals into digital and back again; plus a CPU chip to compress the digitised data; and since the market is people who want to watch TV from their sofas, you need to include control logic and circuitry able to handle a remote control.

Developing the software to make all this work isn't cheap. The end product is something about as complex as a computer, so you'd better add a fan to

keep the whole thing cool.

Oh dear. That fan is pretty much a deal-killer.

It's damn loud – louder than most home and office computers; loud enough to be clearly audible from across a living room, over a TV running at normal listening volume. It's

preposterously

distracting for a device intended to become part of a home theatre system.

The 430mm by 70mm by 370mm slimline styling of the H40E style-checks currently popular design motifs, with a bright blue LED behind the power

switch and a mirror panel along the front.

Apart from the background ruckus, performance is... a matter of taste.

Image compression means there is a visible difference between the quality of the received and the replayed image, even at the highest quality setting.

It's not much – a slight shimmer of noise – but it is detectable, and gets worse at the lower quality settings. If your reception is sub-optimal to start with, you may not care much.

Compared to the image degradation caused by a weak signal or ghosting, what the H40E adds is nothing. It's certainly a far better picture than VHS.

Performance sometimes falls off alarmingly, though; the H40E always inserted a few blank blue frames when changing channels, and sometimes the image stuttered and showed nasty artefacts when switching from live to recorded programming.

As you might expect, quality is traded off against recording time; maximum quality puts 13 hours of video on the hard disk, medium quality 20 hours, and standard 40 hours.

That's pretty serious compression, since the 40GB internal hard drive (which, like newer hard disks, is mercifully click- and rattle-free, not that you can tell over the fan noise) is also partitioned to hold a week's worth of MP3s and 10,000 JPEG images. That should be enough for most family photo albums.

By default the H40E spools the last hour of whatever channel you're tuned to; and yes, it is mighty fine to be able to pause a live TV programme for a quick snack or whatever, then catch up to real time by fast-forwarding through the ad breaks.

It's even possible to record and replay simultaneously, so if you're the sporty type you can make your own action replays without missing any of the game.

You'll have a hard time working out how, though. After the fan, the manual



is the second most irritating thing about the H40E.

Once you've got the hang of it, it's not too hard to use – but didn't they say the same about VHS recorders? And aren't most surviving VCRs still flashing '12:00' most of the time?

The H40E brings similar user-friendliness to a hard disc recorder. Allow for an hour of careful study before use.

Thanks to its obtrusive fan, it's hard to recommend the Samsung DVD-H40E to anyone.

If Samsung fixed the fan it would make more sense – but be aware that this technology is turbulent at the moment, with hard disk prices dropping fast and Microsoft engaged in vigorous negotiation with Sky about introducing TiVo-style self-programming systems next year.

Even early adopters might prefer to wait for a future model - the H1000Z perhaps?

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