

PINNACLE SYSTEMS “DAZZLE DVC 170”

EVALUATION & REVIEW

PURPOSE: I have numerous VHS tapes that I wanted to replace with DVDs (for longer life, easier storage, and more versatile playback options). I also wanted to edit these tapes to delete portions and add titles, transitions, music, etc. The biggest problem, which Dazzle solves, was a low cost method to transfer analog outputs from my VCR to digital inputs to my PC (which may then be modified and transferred to DVDs). Windows XP SP2 was my PC operating system, and I did NOT use this product with Windows Vista.

PRODUCT: The Dazzle Video Creator Platinum Model 170 is a plug-and-play USB 1.1 or 2.0 video capture device that allows you to record your videos from a camcorder, a VCR, or any video equipment with analog outputs. DVC Platinum uses a hardware encoding chip (to allow full resolution video even with the lower bandwidth of USB 1.1) for real-time video encoding into high-quality MPEG-2 format without taxing your computer's CPU resources. It comes with Pinnacle InstantDVD Recorder software, Pinnacle Studio QuickStart software, and a Studio Bonus DVD at a MSLP of \$89.99.

NOTE: A Dazzle DVD Recorder (without hardware encoding for USB 2.0 usage only) is also available at a MSLP of \$49.99.

HARDWARE: The Dazzle DVC 170 is an approximately 6 inch by 4 inch teardrop shaped device that receives an input video signal via a S-video or RCA cable (not provided), and outputs via a USB cable to your PC. The Pinnacle InstantDVD Recorder software allows for a quick installation, providing the hardware driver and an operational PC interface.

NOTE: I needed to purchase the RCA cables (less than \$10) to connect it to my VCR, and had to update my PC graphics controller driver (for a better video display). Otherwise, the installation was successfully done in a few minutes.

SOFTWARE: The Pinnacle InstantDVD Recorder software allows for the direct transfer of the input video to a DVD (without editing), or capture to a PC file where editing of the video is possible (with subsequent transfer to a DVD). The PC capture and editing option was my preference and the basis of this review.

My problems, most of which have been resolved, included the following:

1) **Inadequate documentation:** The software includes a “Wizard” assistant, “Help Menu” and “User Guide” (in PDF format). Unfortunately, there are no technical specifications on the differences between the software capture quality with the options of “good”, “better” and “best” (all MPEG-2 files with varying bit rates), but instead there are estimates of how much video time will fit on the selected destination media.

The website “Knowledge Base” had little useful information, and the “Forums” were very confusing and more orientated toward “gripes” rather than helpful facts. The website “Chat” puts you in a queue that took almost an hour to get an agent, and the first time I used it I was disconnected when I got to the top of the queue with “An Agent is not available”. My second “Chat” session was helpful, but information was very general vs. the specific facts that I was requesting.

2) **Video Quality:** This is very important! I wasn't sure what to expect, but my initial full screen video quality was very “fuzzy” and disappointing! I spent quite awhile on a Google search, and found that the following factors can/will contribute to the quality of the final video that is captured:

- **VHS Tape Quality:** This is a/the major factor. Commercial VHS tapes professionally made (as my AARP tapes) can/will give excellent quality final videos. Old VHS tapes on the other hand, recorded at “extended play” on an old VCR can/will result in lower quality final videos.
- **VCR Quality:** The age and quality of the VCR used to provide the input signal to the Dazzle device can/will alter the quality of the final videos.
- **USB Port:** The type of USB port (USB 1.1 or 2.0) and its location on the PC (rear vs. side) may alter the quality of the final videos (but I have been unable to confirm this as I used only USB 2.0).
- **PC Specs:** Dazzle requires: Windows® XP (SP2 or higher); Intel® Pentium® or AMD® Athlon® 1.4 GHz or higher (2.4 GHz or higher recommended); 512 MB RAM (1 GB recommended); DirectX® 9 or higher compatible graphics card with 64 MB (ATI® Radeon® or NVIDIA® GeForce™ 3 or higher, with 128 MB recommended); DirectX 9 or higher compatible sound card (Creative® Audigy® or M-Audio® recommended). My computer had 512 MB RAM, and the chat agent said “You need more RAM”. When I asked “How much more?” he replied “More than 512”.
- **Video Player Software:** The quality of the video differed significantly using Windows Media Player Version 9 (lowest quality); Nero MediaPlayer & Nero ShowTime (medium quality); and Dell PowerDVD (best quality).
- **Capture Quality:** There is a difference between “good”, “better” and “best” video capture, but I still don’t know exactly how they differ.

3) Editing: I have been unable to date to use the Pinnacle Studio QuickStart software and the Studio Bonus DVD acceptably, probably due to inadequate PC specifications, but I will spend additional time on this, as well as evaluating other software.

NOTE: Dazzle currently comes in only two models: Dazzle Video Creator Platinum (this review with hardware encoding for USB 1.1 usage), and Dazzle DVD Recorder (not reviewed without hardware encoding for USB 2.0 usage only). All prior models still work, but they do not have all the features, power, and technology of the current models. In addition, there may be different software versions, so it is critical that you know exactly what you are buying! Older models and software often received poor Internet reviews, and there are often major differences in reviews on the same product! My review changed significantly with the time spent in using and understanding this product, and will probably get better with time as I learn more about it. Beware those who give a very poor review based upon an initial experience just out of the box! If you happen to use a poor quality VHS tape in an older VCR, with a computer that doesn’t meet minimum specifications, and view the result full screen in an older video player, you will undoubtedly be disappointed. With a great VHS tape in a new VCR, and with a new quality PC and current software, you will probably be extremely satisfied. For most of us, we probably somewhere in between these extremes!

It is also very important to evaluate alternatives. What else is available that will work better, easier, and/or at a similar cost? In my limited experience, I personally don’t know of anything else currently available on the market that is better.

BOTTOM LINE: I am fully satisfied with the Dazzle DVC 170 hardware device! It works well and meets my need to convert VHS analog tapes to digital DVDs! The video quality from the conversion of commercial or professional grade VHS tapes to DVD is excellent (when played with Dell’s PowerDVD). My old VHS tapes conversion is OK, but I hope to be able to improve the quality of these conversions over time with more knowledge and experience (and maybe some hardware upgrades). I would recommend the Dazzle DVC 170 hardware device to our NJCC membership for a similar use.