HD on the Cheap and on the Go
“Viewing high-def TV on your laptop.”
by Joe Lavin

Like many men, I have a dream. It's the dream of having high-definition television. I didn't say it was a particularly noble dream, but it is a crystal-clear, sharp, and vibrantly colored one. Of course, the problem is that I don't have an extra thousand dollars to spend on a high-definition television, but when I heard that I could view high-def television on my laptop for about $100, I had to give it a try.

There are actually many high-definition tuner cards on the market that will do this. Some work through a PCI slot and are a little more stable. I work primarily on a laptop computer and needed one that would work through a USB port. And so I ended up choosing the Hauppauge WinTV-HVR-950 (www.hauppauge.com), which retails for $99.

The device itself is a small one—only a little bigger than a flash-memory drive—with a spot to plug in a coaxial cable. It also comes with a small, high-definition antenna that has a range of about 10 miles. Obviously, then, the device works best for people who live in cities and are close to television stations, although you can also connect a more powerful HD antenna to the device. (Indoor antennas cost about $50-75; outdoor antennas cost about $120.)

The installation itself was relatively simple, although it does take several minutes for the WinTV 2000 software to scan through all the channels. Luckily, I live close enough to a city that I can access about 10 high-definition stations. Once hooked up, the picture is certainly amazing. The first thing I came across was a PBS travel show to Northern Ireland, and I was blown away by the pictures. When the presenter introduced the show on a cliff overlooking the ocean, I felt like I was right there with him.

Unfortunately, the second thing I saw was the high-definition version of Jeopardy, which is entirely unnecessary. I can also attest that Dr. Phil need not be shown in high def, either. Surprisingly, though, in my area, there were a few free over-the-air HD channels that I didn't even know about back when I lived only in an analog world. Many PBS stations use the extra bandwidth to broadcast a second HD channel. I also discovered a free weather channel (get ready for high-definition Doppler radar!) and a local channel dedicated to music videos (remember those?). Even on HD channels, there are still many standard-definition programs that don't look so nice when transmitted in high definition, but there's still plenty of good stuff available for free.

Mixed Results

To be honest, though, as much as I liked the picture, the results were somewhat mixed. The problem is that my computer doesn't seem quite advanced enough to handle the pictures. It's not as if it's an old computer, either. It's an IBM laptop that I bought this past fall. I didn't get the most advanced model on the market, but it still has a 1.83GHz processor, 1GB of RAM and a 64MB video card. I had hoped that would be enough for the Hauppauge device to work flawlessly, but there were a few glitches.

For example, while watching the NFL playoffs on my computer was certainly exciting, I did run into a few problems. The stationary shots were incredibly crisp, but the action became a little tougher to follow when the camera moved quickly. Pass plays were somewhat jarring to watch.
The picture didn't get pixilated, but it did seem to skip ever so slightly, which could be a little disconcerting. The problem seems to be caused by my video card, which apparently isn't quite powerful enough for NFL playoff action.

At one point, during a key playoff game—I'm from New England, so it's probably best that I not mention the specific game here—I took to watching on both my high-definition computer and my low-definition television. I would watch the running plays and everything else on my computer, and then turn to the television for the pass plays.

My system worked perfectly for the first half—until, that is, I was mocked for unnecessary sports fanaticism. "Jeez, now, you're watching the game on two televisions!" exclaimed a certain person who will remain nameless. I was forced to stop. Still, it was interesting to watch low-definition and high-definition side-by-side. You could certainly tell the difference.

The device's DVR capability posed another problem. One of the main reasons I bought the card was to be able to record television to my hard drive, but this feature doesn't always work so well. Unfortunately, HD files are so big that my laptop did have some problems with them. After a few minutes, the video would occasionally become pixilated on my machine. This is mainly because an hour of HD programming takes up about 6GB of space. I still own an old computer whose entire hard drive is that size!

However, you can also use the device with any analog signal, either from a normal antenna or non-HD cable box. True, you don't get high definition that way, but you can still watch TV on your computer, and the DVR software seems to work fine when it doesn't have to handle those large HD files. Those not willing to sign up for HD service from their cable company can also use a signal combiner to connect both a non-HD cable box and the HD antenna to the device simultaneously. All this is not as convenient as a TiVo, but you also don't have to pay a monthly fee either.

And finally, here's one feature I didn't anticipate: portability. Because the antenna and tuner card are so small, it's easy to take with you. As long as you stay within 10 miles of the television stations, with this device and a notebook computer, you suddenly have yourself a portable high-definition TV. Now, you can even watch the game in high definition while at the beach.

www.computoredge.com
03/02/2007