

THE HOME Theater

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**Danger in the
Divx Zone**

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from the test market



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Fear and Loathing



in Frisco Madness and Mayhem In the Divx Zone

Desperate for a Divx DVD player, Home Theater steps into the maw of a horrifying test market. And lives to tell about it.

by Rob Sabin

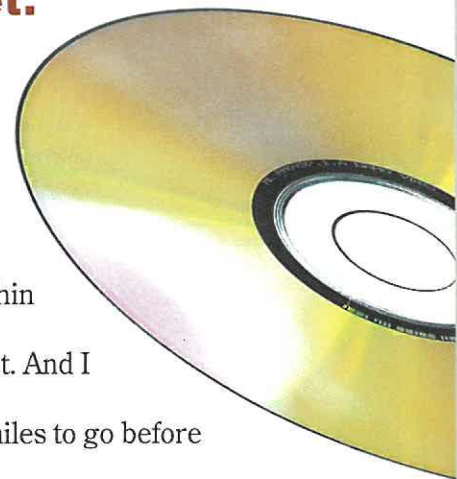


“DO YOU SERVE ALCOHOL ON THIS FLIGHT?”

The flight attendant smirked as she nodded her head, but otherwise kept her demeanor. It was, after all, only a 90-minute trip from L.A. to San Francisco—hardly enough time to finish off a respectable cocktail. In retrospect, though, the 7:05 a.m. departure was probably what got her. But if I needed anything at that moment, it was a stiff drink. Hell, I’d only been awake two hours, and already my nerves had been seriously jangled by a navigational error on the way to the

airport that brought me within seconds of missing my flight. And I still had 16 hours and 800 miles to go before completing my mission and landing back in Los Angeles, out of occupied territory and safe, once more, from the high-tech madness that was sweeping the Bay Area. That is, out of the Divx Zone.

My task was simple. It was early July, and the Divx rollout had been under way for a month with a limited two-city test market in Richmond, Virginia (Circuit City’s home



town), and San Francisco, where The Good Guys had joined forces with Circuit to promote the pay-per-play DVD technology that shook the consumer electronics biz 10 months earlier. Who could forget that heady time? We all swirled like a screaming funnel cloud around news of a new, incompatible DVD format, announced right on the eve of the holiday season that was supposed to be DVD's coming-out party, and with no product—not even a working demo unit—anywhere



Anti-Divx forces in the Bay Area roll out the red carpet for the new kid in town.

in sight. Suddenly, it was open season on Circuit City, which developed Divx in conjunction with a prominent Hollywood law firm and owns two-thirds of the venture. But the secrecy with which the technology was developed, coupled with the poor timing of the news, gave the entire industry a black

eye. I called it "The Divx Fiasco" in *Home Theater's* December '97 cover story.

In any event, we at *HT* were anxious to get our hands on one of the Divx-equipped Zenith/Inteq DVD players ushering in the new era, but Zenith had been surprisingly coy about committing one to our purview. Of course, the word was out following our December story that *HT* was *persona non grata* with the Divx/Circuit City folks. Something about "fiasco" in the headline, the Divx PR person told me, not to mention our cover, which featured a banner that read, "Does This Mean War?" and a photo of WWII hand grenades with "Divx" sloppily painted on their sides. Or maybe it was the two virulently rabid anti-Divx editorials that ran in the same issue.

Who knows? But editor Brent Butterworth and I realized that the only way to guarantee we'd be able to



**We realized the only way
we'd be able to test the thing
was to buy one off the rack.**

test this thing before Armageddon (the event, not the movie) was to buy one off the rack. That would necessitate transportation to one of the infected areas, not to mention nerves of steel. Because, we had decided, we would not only write about the first Divx DVD player, but also about the experience of *buying* the first Divx DVD player. Would the average chain-store sales hack

be able to tell us the difference between Divx, Divx Silver, and Divx Gold? Could they explain the finer points of what makes Divx different from open DVD? Would they be able to demonstrate the system and respond honestly to our concerns as consumers?

To answer these questions, we'd have to do some serious mystery shopping, posing as average consumers while probing the sales help for any sign of scruples or training. A quick meeting in the *HT* War Room resulted in my being volunteered for the job. Since I was heading to our L.A. office that week, I would take the shuttle to San Francisco, purchase a player and a dozen of the super-encoded movie discs, then make my escape, pausing only long enough to catch a little dim sum in Chinatown. War is hell, but a guy still has to eat.

That Saturday morning I disguised myself in a loud yellow-plaid sports shirt, threw a red nylon knapsack over my shoulder, and headed for the airport. But the only place I knew how to find at LAX was the auto-rental return, and I got hopelessly lost in the maze of desolate back roads behind the airport. By the time I got parked in the short-term lot and dashed to my plane, they were practically closing the doors. It was nothing a Jack and Coke couldn't cure, but after that smirk from the flight attendant I thought better of it and just took the Coke. Then I sat back and wondered what could possibly lie ahead.

The minute I arrived at San Francisco International, things began to look up. The car waiting for me at the Hertz lot was a new Pontiac Grand Prix SE with a spoiler on the back, finished in a high-gloss fire-engine red that perfectly matched my bag. It was more than I could have hoped for: fast like a cheetah off the line and conspicuous on the getaway, copiously appointed with a premium sound system and comfortable seats that would come in handy when I pressed the GP into service as the temporary CurtCo Freedom Office of Divx Affairs. I hit the road with the stereo blaring.

A short while later I was exiting the highway into town when something flew by me: Propped alongside the elevated 101 freeway was one of the hugest damn billboards I've ever seen. It was stark white with giant black letters. And the letters said, "Only Open DVD Delivers." And then it was gone.

Did I just see that? I turned around and drove by again. Sure enough, there it was, with the logos of several video-software chains lining the bottom of the sign. I knew that the video-software dealers had been

outspoken critics of Divx, for good reason. With the Divx system, consumers purchase a \$4.50 "rental" disc that gives them 48 hours of play time, and they can purchase additional rental periods through their player's modem. That means you never have to go back to the video store to return a disc. It also means that any jerk with a cash register, from the pump jockey at your local gas station to the neighborhood convenience store, can get into the video-rental business hassle-free.

So I shouldn't have been surprised when I saw that sign. Nonetheless, the enormity of it, the reality of its



Circuit's Van Ness store: nice to look at, but is anybody home?

message, sent a shiver up my spine. I mean, 95 percent of those driving by wouldn't even know what DVD is, much less that "open DVD" refers to the regular "unlocked" DVD format that debuted in March 1997. But this black-and-white beast proved that the battle lines had been drawn, even before the national rollout scheduled

for Divx in the fall. There could be no doubt: I was driving straight into consumer electronics hell. Welcome to Frisco. Bring your body armor.

Divx Central

It was still early in the day when I pulled into a spot on Sutter Street, just west of Van Ness Avenue, one of San Francisco's main drags. I was a block north of a Circuit City outlet on Van Ness, and just two blocks south of The Good Guys. This central location would allow me to conduct reconnaissance and shopping excursions to both stores without having to move the car, though it did mean feeding a steady stream of



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I was driving straight into
consumer electronics hell.**

quarters into a one-hour parking meter. I loaded it up and hopped into a coffee shop on the corner to grab some breakfast and plan my day. I decided I would begin by scouting both stores, locating the Divx displays and making sure everything looked "normal," whatever *that* meant. Then, I would begin at Circuit, work the sales help there, and move up to The Good Guys and shop *that* store. In other words, I'd act like

a typical consumer. Whoever gave me the most accurate information on Divx and treated me with the most professionalism would get the sale.

The Circuit City store was gorgeous. I could tell from the facade that it was an old building, but the interior was modern, spacious, and beautifully merchandised (as we old trade reporters like to say). The sales "counselors" were well dressed in shirts and ties. All in all, this was a place that really made you want to shop.

The presence of Divx was announced by a couple of tall banners near the front door, and the actual Divx display was a nice backlit custom rack right near the TVs. The faceplate of the only Divx player then available—the Zenith/Inteq DVX2100—stared out from the prime position on the top shelf with a ticket marked \$499. Several other DVD players were doubled up on each shelf down below at higher and lower price points. The Divx model was comparable to the \$399 base models, lacking as it did a Dolby Digital decoder and both component video and DTS outputs, so I deduced that the Divx premium was \$100.

Across the aisle from the hardware display was a software rack brimming with Divx movies priced at \$4.49 each. The Divx packaging is a stylized jewel box, and I counted about 30 different films, mostly action/adventure. With everything looking in order here, it was time to head uptown to The Good Guys.

Wow! What a difference. This store felt like a bazaar. It, too, was housed in an old building—a marquee above the door suggested it was once a theater—but the interior was shabbier than Circuit's store. And though it was hard to tell if it was really any smaller, this space felt uncomfortably cramped and crowded the minute I stepped inside and tried to move around.

Most of the DVD players were in a tiny room with some rear projectors on the second floor, but there was no Divx there. I eventually located a rack with the Divx DVD player and a couple of others situated immediately to the right of the front door of the store—and I mean immediately. Anyone entering the store would probably be looking directly ahead to get the lay of things and would walk right by, as I did. More to the point, a customer interested in discussing Divx would have to combat street noise from the propped-open front door, and dodge the steady stream of people entering and leaving the building. Two spinning CD racks filled with Divx

movies carried many of the same titles I saw in Circuit, along with a few others.

Satisfied, I headed back to the Grand Prix, sinking into the driver's seat to jot a few notes with the air conditioner and radio cranked. Then I took a deep breath, fed the meter for another hour, and went back to Circuit City. It was time to do the deed.

Test Market Terror

I was approached immediately by a salesman when I arrived at Circuit's Divx display. He was a short, wiry guy in his early 20s and, as I later gathered, probably a bit inexperienced. And while I did get his name, we've decided not to print it, or the name of my Good Guys sales associate, to spare both of these gentlemen any personal embarrassment. The purpose of our investigation was to get a sense of



Divx now playing at
The Good Guys.

how well these people had been prepared by their management to introduce what is arguably a sea-change technology, and to ascertain whether Divx could be explained lucidly and sold fairly in today's mass-market retail climate. At the risk of stealing my own thunder, I'll tell you right now that neither of the salesmen I dealt with, at least at this early juncture, were well versed on the intricacies of Divx. It could have been the luck of the draw—the next salesman to come by might have been better. But the test was fair: My luck was no different than any shopper's might be.

I began by telling my salesman—we'll call him



**It was apparent this guy
shouldn't have been selling DVD,
much less Divx.**

Mike—that I was in the market for a DVD player, and by the way, what was the story on this Divx thing? Mike responded by taking me through all the products on the display. We quickly established that since I wasn't interested in laserdiscs, I would have no use for a Pioneer DVD/LD combi player that was there, or, for that matter, the two units down below it. That's because Mike insisted that these, too, were DVD/LD combi units, when in fact they were merely DVD players equipped with Dolby Digital decoders. Uh-huh. It was apparent that this fellow

Zenith DVX2100 DVD Player With Divx Feature

What do you have if three lawyers are buried up to their necks in cement? Not enough cement.

by Mike Wood

What do you have if you put a bunch of lawyers together with a consumer electronics retail giant? No, not a holiday with my family (though there are plenty of lawyers there, too), but the Divx corporation, hence the lawyer joke. *HT* editor at large Rob Sabin gives you the basic description in his accompanying article; my task is to see how well Zenith's DVX2100—the world's first Divx player—works, and whether or not this is really a workable concept for consumers.

At first, I thought Rob had maxed out his expense account when I saw the dozen or more discs that he had purchased. Then I realized that each movie cost only \$4.50. I have to say that, for as much as I am leery of lawyers (family excluded), I was starting to like at least one premise for Divx. Go to the store once, and for not much money, you can get all the movies you ever wanted to watch. No standing in front of the rental bin, scratching your head, asking yourself, "What was it that I wanted to rent when I was here last week?" Just take them all home at once and watch them when you want. Score one point for Divx. My suspicions started to subside and I was eager to take a further look.

What's black and brown and looks good on a lawyer? A Doberman pinscher. What's silver and black and looks good in your equipment rack? No, not the Oakland Raiders, but Zenith's player. Right out of the box, it was impressive. Zenith, which has been having a difficult time in the consumer electronics market lately, has built an attractive unit. Granted, Zenith's "Z" lightning bolt logo is looking a little tired, but the silver-and-black faceplate has an elegant look that will fit in nicely with most decor. Likewise, the Divx discs come in small CD-like boxes that, though not as sturdy as DVD cases, are both more attractive and easier to open. Score another point for Divx.

A look on the back panel revealed some interesting-

The DVX2100 looks like any other DVD player, but is the first to add Divx playback to its arsenal of features. Back panel: the phone jack gives the secret away. The Zenith remote: feels good, but acts a little quirky.



shouldn't have been selling DVD, much less Divx. I prepared myself for the worst.

Next up were the two budget models priced at \$399. These didn't play Dolby Digital, so I wouldn't want those. Huh? I thought all DVD players could play Dolby Digital. Mike wavered on this. He was aware that these models did not contain Dolby Digital decoders. But he didn't seem to fully understand that all DVD players can *output* a Dolby Digital signal, whether or not they have an onboard decoder.

That left the Divx player, which, he noted, cost \$100 more than the base models. But it added Dolby Digital, he said (despite the fact that it lacked a decoder) and all the cool Divx features. He launched into a pretty good explanation of the benefits of Divx and why I might want it: DVD picture and sound quality, nothing to return, no late fees, the ability to build a movie collection at \$4.50 a pop, and to purchase additional 48-hour rentals through the machine for \$3.25. He further told me that as an alternative I could "Silver" a disc by paying \$10 to unlock it permanently, although he failed to mention that not every disc will necessarily be upgradable, or that the upgrade fee is set by the studios and could ultimately vary from title to title. He also failed to point out that these Divx Silver discs would still incur charges when played on any Divx machine not registered to my account—a friend's player, for example, would be charged a 48-hour rental fee.

As for how the system works, Mike explained correctly that when I brought the unit home I'd have to hook it up to a phone line, call an 800 number, and give them my credit card data. But he told me I'd be making that call to activate whatever \$4.50 disc I was trying to play. Furthermore, there-

**Things were spinning
Terribly out of control. "Not here,"
I muttered. "Let's talk outside."**

after I'd have to call Divx with my credit card number *every time* I loaded a new Divx disc, he said, basically for "security" reasons.

That's incredibly wrong. In practice, you set up your account once when you get the player home, and the modem in the player automatically contacts Divx once or twice a month via a toll-free number to

looking, but otherwise typical connectors. There are two complete sets of audio and composite video outputs. The first set of outputs, and a coax digital output, all use an RCA connector with a claw-type base on the chassis side. This odd-looking jack does not seem to affect performance, but it sure looks weird. Zenith also included an S-video output and a Toslink optical digital output. The Toslink output allows both PCM and Dolby Digital to be decoded by an



external processor. The digital output does not pass DTS. This player is apparently made by Zenith's parent company, LG Electronics (a.k.a. GoldStar), and to our knowledge, it's their first DVD player. And, of course, Zenith is new to the DVD game and they just filed Chapter 11. So we'll cut them some slack, but they better get with it on the DTS issue. The only other connector on the back is a phone jack and this is where the fun begins.



Why does the law prohibit sex between lawyers and their clients? To prevent clients from being billed for the same service twice. Why does this DVD player have a phone jack? So Divx can bill you whenever you want to re-rent a movie. After I plugged the unit into my home theater system and my phone jack, I attempted to register all numbers associated with my life with the Divx organization. Of

course, I forgot to bring the remote home, and as with most players, you can't do anything, including registration, without the remote. After making a separate trip back to the office and returning with the remote, I logged on to the Divx Web site, as instructed by the player's onscreen menu, to try to register. Foiled again. There was no readily apparent location on the Web site for registration. The national rollout this fall might bring the registration to the forefront of the Web site, but until then, you'll have to do as I did, use a phone. A pleasant-sounding woman took down my address, phone number, DVD player's serial

download a record of your activity. The Divx charges are then made to whatever credit card you specified, and you pay them once a month along with your other charges. What he told me was not only



untrue, but also discouraging for a potential customer.

Then Mike dropped the bomb. He had gotten into talking about Divx

software and mentioned that there were already 50 Divx titles on the market, and there would be 400 by year end. Compare that with DVD, he said, for which there were presently “only 100” titles. I tried to keep a straight face, not believing what I’d just heard. “There’s only a hundred titles on regular DVD?” I asked,



Though fewer than 40 Divx titles could be found at either of the stores we visited, we assembled a nice mix of action/adventure, comedy, and drama.



incredulous. After all, by the second week of July '98, there were between 1,100 and 1,500 DVD titles, depending on who you asked. But Mike

was insistent, and explained to me that the big Hollywood studios (I think he called them “producers”) had failed to embrace DVD because the movies were too easy to copy. On the other hand, all of the big studios were lining up behind Divx, he said, and he mentioned several, including Warner Bros. and “All-Star,” which I took to mean Columbia/TriStar. He was wrong there, too, as neither studio has made any such commitment. Indeed, Warner Home Video has practically dedicated itself to destroying Divx—I later learned they were behind the billboard I’d seen—and Columbia/TriStar is owned by Sony, also an acknowledged, if less outspoken critic. That’s why I was surprised again when, a while later, Mike volunteered Sony as the first name in a list of hardware manufacturers that had signed up to sell Divx DVD players just as soon as Zenith’s exclusive ran out.

It was somewhere around this time, as the horror of it all was sinking in, that Miss Muffet the Mystery Blonde suddenly intruded on our delicate space. I had noticed her floating around the Divx display. She

number, and, among a few other things, my credit card. Yes, you must either have a Visa, MasterCard, or electronic debit card so that Divx can suck your money directly from your account. Though some people might find this an advantage because they won’t have yet another monthly bill and another check to write, I had to subtract major points for Divx. I admit, I’m a little paranoid, but I don’t like giving anyone access to my bank accounts or other creditors. I coughed up my account number and crossed my fingers. Besides, editor Brent Butterworth was signing the expense report, right Brent?

What’s the difference between a lawyer and an onion? You cry when you cut up an onion. What’s the difference between a Divx player and an open DVD player? Not much, really. Once you get past the billing concept, the actual performance and quality of the Zenith player had a few quirks, but was neither substantially worse nor sub-

Zenith DVX2100

Sony DVP-S300



CFG Labs measures: Zenith DVX2100

On Sony’s KV-32XBR100 monitor, the DVX2100 had little, if any, visible difference in picture quality when compared to the Sony DVP-S300 DVD player. The Zenith’s video frequency response, in fact, does not fall off at high frequencies. However, it has so many anomalies that it is difficult to determine exactly what is going on. It is almost as if every other frequency band were at some fraction of the normal amplitude. This information may show up on higher-resolution displays. With that in mind, we have arranged for a long-term loan of a high-resolution projector and scan converter to analyze future products under the most demanding of conditions. The picture’s output was measured using a 100-IRE white window and was high by 7% or more. This was extremely noticeable on regular viewing and would be equivalent to increasing the contrast on your television significantly. Green color output was good, though red and blue were low. The Zenith player does not pass information below black. This won’t necessarily affect the picture, but it makes it difficult to set the brightness control accurately.—MW

stantially better than most other DVD players. To begin with, the ergonomics are typical of the players we’ve seen. The remote has a good feel, but it took me a while to get used to it. The play, stop, and resume buttons appear to be backlit, but there was no button to illuminate them. Also, the remote’s search mode did not function properly all the time—it would not allow me to search chapters at the end of the *Video Essentials* test DVD, and the player would not even step through some of the still frames. The menu, on the other hand, is well laid out. All the information is available on a single page, with no hidden menus or

was a tall, attractive woman, somewhere in her late 30s, I thought, wearing a blue pantsuit and a pair of conservative black-rimmed glasses that gave her a studious air. And now, right in the middle of my working on this guy, she began peppering me with questions. "You thinking about buying one?" she asked, "because I am, and I'm wondering what you think...."

The interruption broke my train of thought. I shot her a look, as if to say "buzz off," and told her I was just shopping around. That seemed to take care of her, and I turned back to Mike. I was almost done here; all I had left was to request a demonstration. Unfortunately, there was no phone connection to the player. There was, however, a short Divx promotional video they could play for me, so Mike let it rip. Then he



**Circuit City:
An Equal Opportu-
nity Employer.**

committed one of the great sins of retail selling: He gave me instructions to come find him after the video, and he walked away. He had already invested at least 20 minutes with me. He should have stood by for the four- or five-minute demo reel, then answered any questions I had or, heaven forbid, asked for the sale. But he just strode off, leaving me on my own after he'd brought me to the brink.

Or rather, leaving me with Miss Muffet. The second Mike turned his back she was on me. Only this time she identified herself as a reporter doing a story about Divx, and immediately followed up with, "Are you, as well? You're not a reporter, are you?"

Good lord, I thought, *what's happening?* Was it that obvious? Here I was trying to act innocent, when suddenly there's a strange woman sticking to me like a bug on fly paper, and coming dangerously close to blowing my cover. Could it be possible that even when I'm consciously acting like an idiot I still look like the smartest person in Circuit City?

I ignored her at first, but she persisted. I could already feel my adrenaline begin to race when she pulled out her cassette tape recorder and flashed it at me, begging for a few comments. My body stiffened and my eyes bulged as I quickly looked away toward the monitor. I was doing so well, and now things were spinning terribly out of control. I shook my head in

submenus. Just use the remote's cursor arrows to wander around and change settings.

Divx has other features as well. Like DSS systems, Divx has an ability to send electronic messages from the guys at the law firm to your player. Regardless of whether they send you legal advice or Circuit City's daily specials, Zenith gets major bonus points for not having a blinking light on the front when the e-mail arrives. DSS does, and it's extremely annoying. There is also a section for movie promotions. (Nothing was being promoted during our evaluation.) Presumably, Divx can promote new services or push old ones that don't get used often. This could be interesting as they begin to tally your viewing habits and let studios market specific items to you directly. This connection with the parent company seems to bother some people. I get plenty of telemarketers' phone calls already; I can't imagine that I'll notice a difference with another one.

What do you call 20 lawyers skydiving from an airplane? Skeet. What do you call 20 Divx discs after the 48-hour viewing period? A potential re-rental, a potential unlimited-use purchase, coasters, or landfill waste? The answer is D. All of the above. (Skeet would work, as well.) Besides the dilemma of what to do with the discs, a major drawback to Divx is the fact that all movies are presented in the pan-and-scan, full-frame aspect ratio. Divx argues that average viewers have standard-aspect-ratio televisions and don't like the black bars seen in letterbox movies. This may be true, but open DVD has an advantage because the movies are often recorded in stan-

dard or widescreen versions, all on the same disc. In addition to that, the widescreen version can be anamorphically recorded for improved playback on widescreen displays. Note that the Divx player will play back open DVDs in anamorphic or widescreen formats. It is only the Divx discs themselves that are recorded exclusively in the pan-and-

scan format. I'm not sure why the Divx people limited themselves in this way, but I have to give this point to open DVD.

Audio and video from the Zenith player were relatively good. In my evaluations I used the Divx version of *Tomorrow Never Dies* compared to MGM's open-DVD version, as well as dual copies of the same open-DVD title, and dual copies of the open-DVD version of *Video Essentials*. The audio, sent from both the Zenith's digital and analog outputs,

TESTING SYSTEM

Sony KV-32XBR100 TV, Sony DVP-S7000 and DVP-S300 DVD players, Lexicon DC-1 preamp/processor, Adcom GFA-555II amplifiers, B&W THX speakers, Boston Acoustics 595x THX subs

Fear and Loathing in Frisco

panic. "Not *here*," I muttered through my teeth. "Let's talk outside."

Eventually, we met up on the other side of the store, out of sight of the video department. "So what's the deal?" she asked. As one journalist to another, I told her that I was an editor with *Home Theater* and what



**More Divx software:
Play today, pay
tomorrow.**

I was up to. I figured she'd be grateful for a comment from an "expert." But, she looked spooked when she found out who I was. "Oh no, *you* won't be good," she said quickly, then abruptly turned and began to stride back toward Divxland. "Who are you with?" I asked suspiciously. She admitted to

being a newspaper reporter, but wouldn't tell me which paper she worked for. In fact, she "couldn't" tell me, she said, suggesting only that she was "local." Then she walked away.

That's when it dawned on me that Muffet was probably no journalist. Any real metro reporter would have announced her affiliation, congratulated herself on running into a consumer electronics editor, and worked me like a pinball game. So who was she? Then it hit me. I'm in a *test market*. She might be a market researcher. But for whom? Circuit City and Divx were the obvious choices, though the ramifications were too frightening to consider. Had I just handed my identity to another undercover spy working the same floor for the other side at precisely the same time? Would they now chase me from the premises, or try to end my career by rolling up a copy of our December issue and beating me about the head with it until my eyes bled? And was *anyone* in this damn store a *real* customer?

My mind was starting to buckle from the stress. It was time to get out of there. Based on my experience with Circuit's salesman, I'd already decided that the folks at The Good Guys would have to throw up on my shoes and hurl ethnic slurs at me to lose the sale. So I just high-tailed it for the front door and, still shaken, stopped outside to take in the sunlight and fresh air. That's when I noticed a sign on the front of the building that read: "Always hiring great people!" I pondered that. Did it mean *everyone* they hired was great people? Or just

was comparable in overall quality to the sound from both the Phillips DVD-410 player and the Sony DVP-S7000.

With video, the Zenith player had a noticeable boost in output compared to other sources. Bond's face looked more washed out and shiny, colors were slightly faded, and white highlights looked slightly blurred from the DVX2100, regardless of which version of the disc I played. The whole picture looked like the contrast was set too high. Test measurements later showed that, in essence, it was. This could easily be fixed at the factory. Many of the players in our recent DVD Face Off also had boosted video output levels, but the Zenith went beyond even those. This problem will cause the contrast setting of your monitor (assuming it is set correctly) to require readjustment every time you switch to the DVD player, unless your monitor has an individual picture memory for each input. I think all DVD-player manufacturers need to do a better job of adjusting their players' video output levels. With the contrast on the monitor readjusted for the Zenith player, there were no visible motion artifacts, color was vibrant, and details were sharp.

DVX2100 Divx Player	\$499
Zenith Electronics Corp. (847) 391-7000 www.zenith.com Circle Reader Service No. 525 Dealer Locator Code ZEN	



When you first play a Divx disc, a screen appears that asks if you want to play the movie, or purchase the movie for unlimited play. Down at the bottom of the screen, there is a confusing note that says, "If this movie's free viewing period has been used, the charge for two days is \$3.25." Since one of the discs, *Scream*, that Rob sent had been opened, I had no idea if he had watched it or not. Given this opening screen's ambiguity, I had no idea if I was going to be charged or not. After you have watched the movie, and the two days are up, the same screen appears with the more specific note: "The viewing charge for two days is \$3.25."

This lets you know that you will be charged. Re-renting the movie was easier than ordering a movie on DSS. However, Divx should change the opening screen to state whether or not the disc's 48-hour viewing period has been expired. Even changing just a few words to read, "After the free viewing period has been used, the viewing charge will be \$3.25," would help.

that they were always *looking* for great people, but there was no guarantee that the people *I* got would be great? Ten more seconds of this would have left me babbling on the curb like a homeless imbecile. Bewildered, I just shook my head and walked away.

I Left My Heart...

My Good Guys salesman, whom I'll call Dave, was also a young guy in his 20s, dressed in khakis, an open collar, and what turned out to be a foot of white Monster Cable speaker wire dangling from his belt loop. He generally had a deeper grasp of how Divx worked than his counterpart at Circuit City. Most important, he wasn't afraid to use the phrases "I'm not really sure" and "I can check on that for you." Nonetheless, he still fed me several erroneous "facts." And there was nothing he could do about the crappy look of his store or the poor location of the Divx display.

Dave hit the right note from the get-go by directly addressing my question about Divx. He explained how Divx is for people who like to rent movies but hate late fees, and he told me that a Divx movie was the same as a DVD, except for its special coding that told the player to turn the disc off after its initial 48-hour rental period. He correctly explained how the billing would work on my credit card, though he was under the impression that Divx would call my machine,




**For less than the price of
three regular DVDs,
I took home 13 Divx movies.**

when it's obviously the other way around. Dave did, however, accurately detail my costs for ordering rental periods or unlimited-play Silver disc upgrades through the player—noting, for example, that the price of an upgrade could vary, but that the combined cost of the Divx disc plus the upgrade wouldn't come to more than a typical DVD.

On the other hand, he was confused about where I could play an unlocked Divx Silver disc: He knew it wouldn't work in a regular DVD player, but suggested I'd be able to play it on any of my friend's Divx players by calling into Divx or giving my friend a special code. When he thought about it again, he decided, after all, that I could share my unlocked discs with my Divx-equipped pals without restriction. As

Also, once you start the movie, the free viewing period starts ticking, regardless of whether you finish the movie or not. So don't buy a bunch of movies, and then watch the first few minutes to see which one you want to watch first because you'll use up the free time on all of them. One positive aspect of Divx, though, was that I started my viewing of *Tomorrow Never Dies* on Sunday evening, then continued watching it on Tuesday evening, and though I started the movie the second time before the end of the 48-hour period, the movie played past the point where the time period had ended. Thankfully, the movie did not cut out halfway. Give another point to Divx.

All lawyer jokes aside, I was pleasantly surprised with the look of the player, the layout of the player's menu, the functionality and aesthetics of the discs, and Divx's decision not to cut off the movie once it has started, even if your 48-hour viewing period has ended. The player's remote was acceptable, though problematic. The audio was as good as on the other players we tested. Video, likewise, was good, though Zenith and other DVD-player manufacturers need to bring the output of their players down to an appropriate level. As far as Divx goes, even though I like to poke fun at lawyers, I like the idea of collecting a bunch of rentals at once, though I sometimes still like browsing the aisles of the video store. I seriously doubt I'll ever want to buy a movie that I've rented. I typically rent movies that I don't want to buy, and don't rent movies that I do. I don't like the idea that a movie I may purchase from Divx cannot be loaned to a friend without my friend being billed. And I definitely don't like the fact that they require a VISA or debit card. But if Zenith fixes their player's output, and Divx comes up with an independent billing system, I could be interested. 

noted, these discs will only play on units registered to your own account. I thought maybe he'd confused Divx Silver with Divx Gold discs, which, if they become available, will be purchased fully unlocked and will have that capability. But he later admitted he'd never heard of Divx Gold.

Like Mike at Circuit City, Dave wasn't quite sure who was in and who was out on Divx. Most of the hardware manufacturers, including Sony and Panasonic, were doing a wait-and-see, he said, though he correctly stated that RCA would soon be supplying Divx players. In fact, Panasonic, Pioneer, Harman Kardon, and JVC have all agreed to join Zenith and RCA/ProScan in building Divx machines.

Also, like Mike, he got into trouble when we started

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Fear and Loathing
in Frisco

talking about Divx movies. He was telling me about how future Divx discs would be released simultaneously with the corresponding VHS videotape, and offered that the Hollywood studios really love Divx because it's a rental format that's more lucrative than regular DVD. The studios, he told me, were hoping I'd take that disc home and rent it repeatedly from the comfort of my living room, just racking up charges. "That's why I'm not really a great supporter—I'd rather buy a DVD and own it," he said. I was a little surprised that he would openly voice his disapproval. He gained points for honesty, but not salesmanship.

Then he went on to say that the movie studios' love for Divx also explained why there were already more titles on Divx than on DVD. What? Hadn't I just heard a variation of that lie in Circuit City? I asked how many Divx and DVD titles were currently out. He didn't know, he said, but he brought me to a sales terminal and showed me that The Good Guys listed more Divx titles in their inventory (about 140) than DVD titles (about 80). OK, sure. Where were these guys getting their information? And where were all those Divx movies?

With no phone line connected to the display model, there was no chance of getting a live Divx demonstration, and there was no Divx promo for me to watch, either. Which was just fine. I'd had more than enough. I uttered the words that are music to every salesman's ears—"I'll take it"—and Dave danced off to confirm that the piece was in inventory. It was only the second Divx player he'd sold in the month the format had been on the market.

While he was gone, I started grabbing movies off the display spinners. I assembled a mix that included mostly action/adventure titles (*Tomorrow Never Dies*, *Backdraft*, *Daylight*, *Volcano*, etc.), with some comedy (*Flubber*, *George of the Jungle*) and drama (*Ulee's Gold*) thrown in. But here's the thing: I had more fun picking those discs than I've ever had buying or renting movie software. And for the first time, I understood the incredible appeal of Divx.

For less than the price of three regular DVDs, I took home 13 Divx movies, a baker's dozen that offered precisely the same sound and picture quality as my favorite home video format (albeit in the non-widescreen 4:3 aspect ratio—a point not mentioned by either of my salesmen). Furthermore, I didn't choose these films the same way I pick VHS rentals at Blockbuster. First, there was no rush on when I had to watch

Fear and Loathing in Frisco

them; my rental period wouldn't start until I played them the first time. So I wasn't restricted to movies that I was in the mood to see today or tomorrow. I also weighed these films for their longevity, asking myself

Circuit City	
Overall Rating	
Product Knowledge	60
Salesmanship	65
Divx Display	85
Divx Demo	75
Store Appearance	90

whether each title was one I might want to keep around. That process was itself a great entertainment. Ultimately, I ended up with quite a few movies that I could watch a second or third time, but could never justify buying on open DVD. Of course, if I end up watching them three or four times in a short period without upgrading them to Divx Silver, I'm just a jerk. But for the most part, I realized, I wouldn't mind spending \$3.25 every now and then to pull one of these off the shelf and stick it in the player. And guess what? The rest of the time, it won't cost me anything extra to keep them there, always at the ready.

Dave appreciated this, as well. I was still at the movie display when he came back, but I already had a formi-

dable stack of discs, and when he saw me yanking movies like a tourist pulling dime postcards off the rack he could barely contain himself. "You're buying all *those*?" he asked, unable to suppress his grin. Why, yes, I told him. Wasn't that the idea?

The total ticket came to \$596 flat, including sales tax and a credit for the two free discs I haggled for—let's face it, in this place I wouldn't have seemed authentic if I'd paid full retail without so much as a whimper. Dave deserves credit for having pitched me twice each on an extended warranty and Monster Cable before closing out the sale; I deserve credit for resisting these attempts and staying polite about it.

All that remained was to wait for Dave to actually bring my player from the back room. That's when I spotted Muffet, parked in an aisle just around the corner from the Divx display, feigning interest in some thingamajig on the shelf. Had she followed me here? Had she been watching me? This time, it was me who approached first. "There you are," I accused. "You're a researcher, aren't you? You're not a reporter." As the words left my lips, she was already



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laughing at me, a sweet, disarming laugh that left me wondering whether she was friend or foe. "I can't



Hail the warrior: The author with booty back at the Office of Divx Affairs.

tell you," she replied, with a warm smile. "Did you learn anything interesting?" I asked as my own laughter began to rise up. "I can't tell you that, either," she demurred, still giggling at me.

This time though, instead of rejection or fear, I felt a deep pang, a powerful attraction. Hardly enemies, I realized that we were, in fact, kindred spirits—two spies who came in from the cold, alone together in our harsh clandestine world. We understood each other as few could; the fleeting thrills we lived for, the lonely nights wondering if it was all worth it.

Then Dave returned with my DVD player. I said good-bye to both of them, smiled knowingly at Muffet, and walked out. But since that day, I've been

unable to stop thinking about the Mystery Blonde, or wondering who she was and how she came into my life and left so quickly. Muffet, if you're out there reading this, I beg you: Get in touch. I think I love you. As for the rest of you, if you have information about the identity or whereabouts of this woman, please call

1-800-DIVXTIP. Our operators are standing by, and you may be eligible for a reward.

I strolled back to the Office of Divx Affairs, only to find it plastered with a \$25 parking ticket. In all my befuddlement after my Circuit City visit, I'd forgotten to feed the meter. Oh well, one more item for the expense report. By now, I had only a couple of hours before I headed back to L.A., so I skipped the dim sum and sat down in front of a cold beer and a slice of pizza. Then it was off to the airport to return the car and grab my flight. As the plane reached altitude I reclined my seat and finally settled into that Jack and Coke I'd denied

myself some 14 hours earlier. By now I'd earned it. Sure, war may be hell, but shopping is murder. ☎



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