

JUST PUSH PLAY

PLAYTV

As the battle to produce the ultimate multimedia console continues to wage between Sony and Microsoft, Sony brings *PlayTV* to the battlefield, a no-frills digital video recorder looking to invade your AV setup later this month.

The first thing that strikes you about the *PlayTV* box itself is its uncharacteristically drab aesthetics. While small, lightweight, cool to the touch and completely silent, the unit feels cheaply made with a dull finish and an unsightly USB cable trailing to your PS3. If ever any evidence was needed that the PS3 should have shipped with USB ports on the back, *PlayTV* is it. Beneficially, the power drained from the USB port negates the need for an external AC adaptor, so that's one less wire to worry about at least.

Turn on the unit, however, and all is forgiven. Initial setup is simple, taking around 5-6 minutes to install software and tune channels. The frontend is clean and easily navigable with separate sections for live TV, recorded programs, scheduled recordings and the 7-day EPG, and using the on-screen menus to find a programme is just as intuitive as any other DVR interface you may have come across before. And in spite of the unit itself not upscaling the feed (picture resolution remains at 720x576), the PS3 does an outstanding job at rendering a crisp and clear picture. Unsurprisingly, *PlayTV*'s interface is one of the most visually pleasing and intuitive we've ever seen in a DVR, with slick on-screen menu elements making for a slick on-screen menu and fancy zoom and fade effects kicking in as you flick between channels.

While using the Sixaxis or DualShock 3 with *PlayTV* may not be the most natural method for channel hopping, it nonetheless remains relatively simple. Using L1 & R1 to switch between channels, L2 & R2 to fast forward and rewind, Start and Select to pause and record, and the d-pad and face buttons to navigate the menus, finding your way around *PlayTV* is a doddle. If you've got a BD remote control you'll find navigating the interface even easier using the supplied adhesive overlay, which sticks securely to the top of your remote highlighting *PlayTV*'s functionality.

Like many other DVRs, *PlayTV* also gives you the option to pause and rewind live TV, though you have to enable it in the settings menu beforehand – live buffering is disabled by default. Bizarrely, we were restricted to fast forwarding and skipping back and forth between scenes when using the BD remote during 'Replay TV', but when using the DualShock 3 we could also rewind. Hopefully that's just a pre-release software glitch and something easily fixed in time for launch. The two tuners mean you can watch a



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second programme while recording the first, though you can't record two programmes simultaneously. Scheduling a programme to record is simple, carried out by highlighting the chosen programme and hitting Select. You can also use Replay TV to pause a second programme and leave the feed buffering, should you really need to temporarily record a second programme.

Other features include the ability to search the week ahead via keywords, enabling you to find and record particular shows up to one week in advance. Unlike certain other DVRs however, you can't tell *PlayTV* to record every show in a particular series. Instead, a manual recording has to be set up for the day and time that it's broadcast, much like how you'd set up an old VCR. The lack of this basic feature comes as both disappointment and of annoyance, spoilt as we are by series link features in rival DVRs.

When scheduling programmes to record, *PlayTV* also estimates how much space will be needed for each programme. It's an incredibly useful and highly accurate feature that'll inform you of any potential space issues beforehand, rather than cutting out the recording half way through. For the record, *PlayTV* estimated that 30 minutes of a Channel 4 programme would consume 0.8GB of our hard drive, with the actual recording turning out to be 761MB.

Should there be an error during a recording, *PlayTV* helpfully notifies you before playback. While recording a programme we decided to



remove the aerial partway through, before putting it back in five minutes later to see how the DVR responded. When playing back the programme, a warning notified us of an error within the recording and took the initiative to remove the five minutes from the file. So rather than having to sit and stare at a blank screen until the picture came back, *PlayTV* combined the problem-free parts seamlessly.

We also found background recording to be free of any problems. Alarm bells started ringing amongst prospective buyers when Sony sent out a warning stating that background recording may affect gameplay and/or Blu-ray/DVD playback, but thankfully during our testing we witnessed nothing of the sort. Sitting through the first half hour of our *Casino Royale* Blu-ray proved to be just as enjoyable as ever, with no untoward side effects on the playback or with the recording. We then tested the first chapter of *Metal Gear Solid 4*, which again seemed to have no adverse effects on either the gameplay or the recording going on in the background. Finally we loaded up our PSN download of *Gran Turismo 5: Prologue*. Booting from the hard drive we expected this to come off the worst, but again we saw no problems with either the gameplay or the recording. Load and save times remained consistent and there was no untoward graphical behaviour.

Despite the warning, it seems that Sony has done some fairly extensive playtesting to ensure that problems with background recording are minimal, should they even exist at all. One word of warning though. We found that we had to boot up the game/Blu-ray from the in-game XMB in order for the background recording to work. Quitting *PlayTV* first and booting from the main menu resulted in failed recordings. And contrary to some reports, our *PlayTV* box didn't lock up once during the time we spent testing it, proving to be reliable even after hours of continued use.

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“RECORDED PROGRAMMES CAN BE EXPORTED TO AN EXTERNAL HARD DRIVE AND PLAYED BACK ON YOUR PC”



Unfortunately, the PS3 has to remain switched on while recording, rather than being able to record while in standby. Thankfully, the PS3 will automatically wake itself up from standby mode to record a scheduled programme, before turning itself off again at the programme's end. The PS3 doesn't beep when turning on and off for a recording either, so if you've set up *PlayTV* to record something overnight in your bedroom, you won't be disturbed by the PS3's activity.



You can also export recordings to the PS3's XMB and play them back as you would a downloaded video, negating the need to boot up *PlayTV* to view recordings. These exported recordings can also be backed up to an external hard drive as .m2ts files, which can then be played back on your PC using VLC Media Player. Unfortunately, the PSP doesn't recognise them.

quickly and easily – given you've left your PS3 in Remote Play mode, of course.

PlayTV is, however, compatible with PSP through Remote Play, perfect for when you fancy watching an episode of *EastEnders* under the covers, or perhaps more importantly, when you've forgotten to set up a recording. So if you've gone out for the night and forgotten to set *Dragons' Den* to record, no bother. If you're at a Wi-Fi enabled venue and happen to have your PSP on you, you can get your recording set up

Unfortunately *PlayTV*'s isn't without its setbacks. The biggest irritation users will incur is having to switch on the PS3 and boot up *PlayTV* whenever you want to watch television which, unless you buy an RF splitter, is exactly what you'll have to do. It's not a particularly long process, but 40 seconds of waiting for software to load is never going to be favoured over the quick, one button start-up of your typical TV set. The inability to record HD footage also means that there'll inevitably be a hardware revision should a firmware update not be good enough, and the fact that most modern TV's come packed with a digital tuner also questions *PlayTV*'s value.

Of course the only other limitations come down to how much hard disk space you have left. What with the numerous PS3 titles needing installation, those using a 40GB PS3 may already be pushing single digit figures of remaining hard disk space. To make the most out of *PlayTV*, the only option for them may be to upgrade to a bigger hard drive.



PlayTV's lack of certain basics is counter-balanced by some fantastic features. It's undoubtedly a useful add-on to those looking for an easy solution to recording Freeview television, but the range, ability and ever-decreasing price of rival DVRs ultimately casts doubt over *PlayTV*'s position in the market.

VERDICT ★★★★★