

TEST BENCH

EDITED BY MARK HARRIS

MOVIES ON DEMAND

With digital film downloads growing in popularity, we cast an eye over six systems to see if the quality and price beat renting a DVD from a local shop

These days there are more than 70 channels of digital television and music available through Freeview, so why does it still sometimes feel as though there's nothing on? In the past, you might have headed down to your local shop to rent a video or DVD but in today's high-technology world, the latest movies can come straight to you. New digital video on demand (VoD) services offer films that start when you want them to (or sometimes after a delay) and are often available, like rental DVDs, long before they arrive on terrestrial TV. Unlike online TV catch-up services, such as the BBC's iPlayer, VoD movies are rarely free, and never in the case of the latest blockbuster releases. Prices are about the same as renting a DVD

in-store (from £2-£4) but instead of watching them on a DVD player, you use an extra box connected to your television.

You select a film from menus on screen and it arrives digitally through a broadband internet, satellite or cable TV connection. We tested six VoD services using all three delivery methods and one HD ready television, and found that VoD isn't all it's cracked up to be.

How a VoD film arrives affects both the quality on offer and how soon you'll be able to start watching it. Satellite VoD can look fantastic but it's not really on-demand viewing: you simply wait until a channel showing your chosen film rolls around. For example, the Box Office service from Sky (a sister company of The Sunday Times) starts films at 30-minute intervals, or sometimes longer. Some films are shown in high definition but the range on offer overall is limited.

Broadband VoD has a much wider selection of films, and delivers them using your internet connection. The BT Vision and Tiscali TV broadband VoD services start streaming your choice within seconds, although neither offers films in high definition. Apple TV and Xbox also start downloading your choice instantly but you have to wait before you start watching: just a minute or two for normal films, but an hour or more for high-definition movies.

With these services, take care not to exceed your monthly broadband download limit, if you have one. Some stingy internet

service providers still limit customers to just 5GB a month (that's less than a single high-definition movie download) and penalties can be as steep as £2 per GB if you break it, potentially doubling the cost of each rental. Download speeds will also vary at different times of day, with evenings and weekends being slowest.

Cable VoD is currently the smoothest option, letting you choose from lots of titles and watching them almost immediately in either standard or high definition. Like satellite TV, though, this involves paying a monthly subscription on top of rental fees.

As with rental stores, all these services charge digital late fees. Once you start watching a movie you usually have 24 hours before you'll have to pay for the film again. This is a sneaky way to charge customers extra, especially as Apple TV offers a much more reasonable 48-hour viewing window.

Four of the VoD boxes, from BT, Sky, Tiscali and Virgin, let you watch normal digital Freeview channels, and all except the basic Sky box also offer "catch-up TV", giving you a chance to view some shows from the previous seven days. These are all worth considering if you watch a lot of television and don't mind forking out a monthly subscription, with Virgin's cable VoD having the edge in speed and image quality.

If you're looking for VoD to replace the occasional trip to the video shop, both Apple TV and Xbox 360 are easy to use and offer

affordable, future-proof HD movies — but require a hefty up-front investment. For anyone yet to upgrade to high-definition TV, though, it seems that traditional DVD rental, either on the high street or through the post, has still got some life in it. Films cost just a few quid to rent, you don't need expensive new equipment and you might even get off the sofa and get some exercise. Don't rip up that membership card just yet.

JARGON BUSTER

Back catalogue Older films that might already have been shown on terrestrial television

HDMI Convenient all-in-one HD video and sound connection

Upscale Converting standard-definition video signals to look better on HD ready televisions

Reviews by David Phelan. Prices include Vat

The quality of a video on demand and how soon you can watch it depends on whether it arrives via broadband, satellite or cable TV



I want a blockbuster — and I want it now

SPEED STAR



★★★★☆

Virgin V — £30, plus from £11 a month for line rental and £1.50-£3.50 per film, www.virginmedia.com

Fast, competent set-top box, best for high definition

The V box streams your choice of 500 movies instantly and smoothly via Virgin's high-speed cable connection, so there's no hanging around for movies to download. There are about 20 blockbusters in high definition, costing 50p to £1 more, although to watch these you'll need the V+ box (pictured, £75 plus £5 a month), which also records TV. In standard definition, American Gangster had a grainy look but with balanced colour and detail. HD movies were smooth and sharp. The V+ remote has a similar jump-back feature to BT Vision, but it's rather too easy to press record instead of fast forward using its fiddly buttons. The software is accessible but not flawless, with pause and playback features working erratically. Having said that, if you want to watch great-looking movies instantly, this is your best choice.



OUTSIDE THE BOX

★★★★☆

Sky Box Office — £30, plus from £16 monthly for TV, £3.99 per film www.skymovies.com

Limited catalogue but outstanding image quality

This isn't true video on demand as you have to wait for the next showing — every half-hour for the latest Hollywood films, and longer gaps for others. If you have a Sky+ box (£149) or Sky HD box (£249), however, you can record Box Office movies to watch when you like. Picture quality is extremely good, with only Virgin looking as sharp and vivid. American Gangster looked bright but with understated, natural colours. There are also superb-looking HD movies on Sky Box Office, at no price premium. Sky offers only 30 titles at a time, updated weekly, although the back-catalogue offerings from rival services tested here are matched by Sky's full set of movie channels (£34 a month), which allows access to 500 films online to download on demand to your computer, at no extra charge.



RECORDER KING

★★★★☆

Tiscali TV, £30, plus from £20 a month for broadband, £1.99-£3.49 per film, www.tiscali.co.uk

Stylish box with the widest choice of films

The latest Tiscali box has two Freeview tuners and also delivers programming via a broadband connection. It offers a library of 1,000 movies to rent individually and, like BT Vision, you can subscribe to 28 more for £5 a month with Universal's PictureBox service. There's no high definition on offer but recording options are excellent, letting you record three shows simultaneously while playing back another. The hardware is neat, stylish and accessible, while the on-screen menus are quick and easy to navigate. Delivery and video quality were on a par with BT Vision: upscaled movies started immediately and smoothly. Picture quality was more than acceptable, though occasionally colours seemed overcast. There are films for everyone here and first-class recording features.



CORE AUDIENCE

★★★★☆

Apple TV — hard drive £200 (40GB) or £269 (160GB), £2.49-£3.49 to rent a film, £6.99-£10.99 to buy www.apple.com/uk

Stylish, easy-to-use choice for wireless homes

Apple has a new service offering 700 digital movies to watch or buy from its iTunes online store. More than 100 are high-definition, costing £1 more to rent than a standard film. Apple TV is a smart-looking hard drive that downloads movies using a broadband connection, even with a wireless network, and plays them on a normal TV. Setup is simple and navigating the onscreen menus idiot-proof, although titles beginning "The" are, annoyingly, filed under T. Standard films could be viewed almost immediately, while HD films were ready to watch about an hour after the download started. HD image quality was rich and bright. Standard-definition films, looking less impressive but still watchable, can also be viewed on a computer (Mac or PC), iPod or iPhone.



JUMPIN' JACK FLASH

★★★★☆

BT Vision — £30 installation, plus from £16 a month for broadband, £1.99-£3.95 per film, www.btvision.bt.com

Great value for TV-watching BT surfers

BT Vision is available only if you get broadband internet from



BT. While you have to pay for installing and using broadband, the box itself is free, so Vision is good value for existing BT broadband subscribers. It is easy to use, with twin Freeview tuners also letting you watch and record TV simultaneously. About 400 movies are available, while an extra £5 monthly Universal PictureBox subscription unlocks 28 more. Although the box "upscales" Freeview content, improving images noticeably, there's no genuine high-definition content. The delay between choosing a movie and it starting is seconds and picture quality is watchable. The remote has neat extras such as a button that jumps a film back seven seconds — handy for "What did he just say?" moments.

PLAYING HARD TO GET

★★★★☆

Xbox 360 — from £190, £2.13-£4.08 per film www.xbox.com

Gaming meets Hollywood, but slow and noisy

Downloading films to an Xbox 360 over broadband requires planning. There are just 80 films available, of which 16 are in HD (costing about £1 extra). The two-and-a-half-hour film The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford took virtually the same time to download, although speeds can be faster in quiet times. Trying to watch it after five minutes into the download gave just six minutes of viewing before the playback caught up with the download and stalled. Returning an hour later, the film was highly watchable — almost as sharp as a DVD. The HD file for The Matrix Revolutions was of excellent quality, noticeably sharper. Sound is disrupted, though, thanks to a noisy cooling fan. A great way to relax between games, then, but non-gamers might balk at the high price and narrow selection.

