

FORGET THE SET-TOP



Strong Technologies SRT 5429 High Definition Personal Video Recorder

Price: \$199
Distributor: Strong Technologies Pty Ltd,
(03) 8795 7990, www.strong.com.au

By Stephen Dawson

It has only one TV tuner, rather than two, and the hard disc is only 160GB in size, rather than the 320GB to 500GB commonly on offer in higher-end personal video recorders. Still, that ought to be good for about 60 hours on the standard definition of ABC1, and 23 hours on ONE HD, currently the most data intensive of all the free-to-air TV stations.

But even so the player manages to offer multimedia support via a USB socket on the front panel. In addition to the usual MPEG2 video formats usually delivered on digital TV, the unit also supports MPEG4. That future-proofs the unit for 3D TV, should Canberra stations ever get around to delivering it.

I worked my way through the player's menu structure to see what options were available, and to tweak things to my own preferences. The only thing really I had to change was the output audio, from the default of "PCM" to "AC3". This way, if any proper Dolby Digital 5.1 programs aired I could enjoy full surround-sound. This setting did change the audio output on the HD stations to Dolby Digital, so I feel confident that surround sound would present no problem if only a TV program using it was being broadcast.

I also found that I could delete some duplicated stations, and set up a Favourites list of stations.

One particularly interesting feature of the player was the ability to set the recording destination. It turns out that you can record to the internal hard disk drive – of course – but also to an external drive plugged into the USB socket on the front panel. So if 160GB sounds too small, you can add more capacity by way of an inexpensive USB disk drive.

The recording worked well once I overcame a quirk. To choose an item to record from the EPG you press the green key, which brings up an "Event Add" screen. This allows the start and end times to be set, and the repeat mode (Once, Daily or Weekly). But the last item on the list is called "Mode" and has a default setting of "View". That is, by default the timer will merely wake up the box. So make sure you go down to that item and switch it to "Record".

One initial flaw in the recording was that the unit would not record for a duration of more than three hours, simply stopping after this time. A firmware upgrade released last month has fixed this. If you already have this unit, you can download the upgrade from Strong's website.

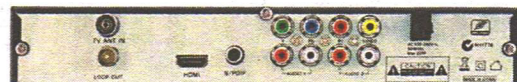
Playback was basic, but the unit offers fast forward and rewind speeds of 2x to 32x.

There is also a time shift mode, which you invoke when required by pressing the "Play" key. Once started, you can pause and then rewind and fast-forward your way around the buffer.

The multimedia functions worked from a USB drive plugged into the front panel, supporting WMA, AAC and MP3 for music; JPEG, BMP and PNG for

photos and MPEG2, DivX and AVI for video.

As for picture quality, this unit was excellent. HDTV was delivered well at 1080i50 with no apparent colour problems nor any blocking or decompression failures. SDTV, usually the bugbear of set-top boxes and PVRs,



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due to poor progressive scan conversion, was also delivered with remarkably good quality. And if you have better video processing in your TV, you can use the "Format" key on the remote control to set the output to 576i50 and allow the TV to do the work.

At this unit's price, why bother to buy a set-top box without recording capabilities?

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