



Reel Connections - Issue #8

MiniDVDs, 20 Years Later

A Weekly Sunday Newsletter from Stilson Video Services



The advantages of the MiniDVD format was offset with caveats

The various media formats always seem to show up in waves at our studio. Last week, we had a lot of MiniDVDs to transfer. And since MiniDVDs have been on my mind, I decided to write about them in this issue.

The MiniDVD camcorder was an interesting concept. Why bother with video tape and transferring when you could record directly to a DVD?

Of course, a regular DVD would have been too large for a portable camcorder, so the MiniDVD was developed. It was 8 cm (3.1 inches), making it $\frac{2}{3}$ the size of a regular DVD. It held less than half as much video due to the smaller size.

The discs were sold in various formats, such as DVD-R, DVD-RW and DVD+RW. Most were single-sided. While double-sided MiniDVDs did exist, they were uncommon and not widely supported by camcorders.

The MiniDVD camcorder format arrived on the scene in 2001. It reached its peak popularity in the mid 2000s. By the end of that decade, it had mostly been replaced by newer camcorders that recorded to **hard drives or flash memory**, such as SD cards.

Its primary competition at the time came from MiniDV camcorders, which used a small, digital video cassette tape. The reason many consumers chose the disc format over tape was:

- MiniDVD camcorders were promoted as a *next-generation* consumer format
- A big advantage was the “**record today, play tonight**” promise—no rewinding, no transferring to another format in order easily view
- Instant access to various scenes on the disc
- The discs could be played directly in most DVD players (with finalization—more on that later)

However, MiniDV, which had been around since the mid 90s, had its own advantages:

- Higher, more consistent video quality
- Better reliability
- Strong adoption by enthusiasts and professionals

In short, **MiniDVD targeted convenience**, while **MiniDV targeted quality and reliability**. This difference helps explain why MiniDVD aged worse and disappeared sooner than MiniDV.

Generally speaking, MiniDVDs worked well *if they were used properly*. In practice, however, I see two major caveats with this format.

Caveat #1: Finalization (the step many users missed)

When you were finished recording your disc, there was a critical final step in the process that, from what we see, about half of users missed. This was finalizing, or closing the disc. Doing so would allow the disc to be played in other DVD players aside from your camcorder. This was not a required step for recording, so many users simply never bothered.

When these discs come into the studio unfinalized, we either need the customer’s original camcorder to finalize them, or sometimes we can use one of our camcorders as long as it’s the same brand and a similar model.

If all else fails, a final approach would be file extraction software. This, however, adds considerable complexity and cost while the results can be mixed.

Caveat #2: Disc durability and real-world handling

The other reality of this media was the handling and care of the discs. In general, these little discs lived a hard life—bouncing around in camera bags, glove boxes, pockets, you name it. Even spinning wildly in a hot camera, played over and over, wasn’t good for them. Many would never find their way back to the original case after recording, leaving them exposed.

The edge of the disc is a weak point. If it becomes cracked or chipped, moisture will find its way in and damage the disc. Moreover, they were often subjected to damaging hot and cold temperatures.

What we see today, 20 years later

When customers bring MiniDVDs in for transfer, we often find:

- Discs that are badly scratched—sometimes so bad, none or only part of the disc can be read.
- Another common problem is delamination, also known as disc rot. Some people assume that if their videos are on DVD, they’re safe. Unfortunately, that’s not always true. Delamination occurs when the layers that comprise a disc begin to pull apart and allow moisture to enter the disc. This usually results in cloudy or shadowy areas on the disc and makes the disc unreadable.
- Finally, as with most things, some discs were made and sold more cheaply than others. These discs offered less protection and broke down sooner.

Looking back, I guess the MiniDVD format looked modern and superior at the time, but it wound up aging poorly in the real world.

So my message is this—even if your MiniDVDs still play well in the old camcorder, the clock is ticking. The discs, and the camcorder, will fail at some point. Before they go back in the drawer for another decade, get them converted to digital files and back them up.

Only then can you feel confident your memories are preserved.

Lives are important.

Our mission is to connect them to future generations the best way possible.

Finally, if you have a topic you’d like me to write about, let me know at stilson@stilson.com and I’ll add it to the list.

— Bill Stilson
Stilson Video Services

216-595-5155
www.stilson.com

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