

Zip Disks: What Was the Point Again?

A Weekly Sunday Newsletter from Stilson Video Services



The familiar blue Zip drive and disk that once held our biggest files

A few days ago a customer walked into the studio with a pile of Zip disks and asked if there was any way I could copy his files onto something “more modern”. He was relieved to hear the answer was yes, because there were a lot of family photos stored on them.

So I dusted off my old Zip drive and while I was copying the files I was wondering why we ever needed these big, clumsy 100MB discs in the first place. Was this really the best option? I needed to do a little research to refresh my memory about this all-but-forgotten media.

Once I started reading about the Zip drive, I began to remember why we needed them – and why I used them myself for my graphic design business 30 years ago.

In the early 1990s, we were still relying on **1.44MB floppy disks** to transfer and back up our files. That meant one high-resolution image could require several floppy disks to store. That’s hard to believe today, but it was common practice back then.

This was a time when file sizes were quickly growing so in no time people were having to manage hundreds of floppy disks. It became clear that the floppies needed to step aside for a better solution.

A company called Iomega answered the call. In 1994, the 100MB Zip drive was introduced. The Zip drive used portable disks with about the same footprint as the floppy, but they could hold roughly **70 floppy disks' worth of data.**

They were an instant hit, and both external and internal drives became available. All kinds of users quickly adopted them, including:

- Graphic designers
- Photographers
- Print shops
- Businesses needing to transfer large files
- Computer hobbyists

By the late 90s, Zip drives were everywhere. Capacity grew to **250MB**, and later to **750MB**. Some computer manufacturers were offering built-in Zip drives as an option. I can remember being excited to have one built into my Gateway home computer.

But then, just a few years later, they began to disappear as technology marched on.

Zip disks ultimately served as a bridge between the floppy disk and the CD, which came on the scene in the late 1990s. CDs were far cheaper with greater capacity.

Shortly after that, USB flash drives were introduced in the early 2000s, and suddenly, nobody needed a Zip drive anymore. It's amazing to think that a modern flash drive today can equal the capacity of **10,000 Zip disks!**

While they weren't around for long, they made a definite impact on the storage media landscape. It's estimated that **240 million Zip disks have been sold worldwide.**

That's a lot of data, and some percentage of it should be transferred before the disks fail.

The Zip drive technology was mechanical in nature meaning there were moving, spinning parts involved in reading and writing the

data. Eventually, like most everything else, they will wear out and fail, resulting in lost data.

Fun Facts

Many of us who've spent time working on computers before modern SSDs, are familiar with the phrase "**click of death**".

What most people don't know is that the phrase originated with the Zip drive.

When the drive couldn't read a disk, it would repeatedly click as it tried over and over to read the data, often signaling that the drive — and sometimes the disk itself — was about to fail.

Decades later, I can still clearly remember that distinctive click. It usually meant you were going to have a bad day.

This unsettling experience for Zip users even led to one of the first viral tech controversies.

The internet was just beginning to take hold and people could now share their "click of death" horror stories online. There was even an early website called "**The Iomega Zip Drive Click of Death Page.**" It became a viral movement that eventually resulted in a class action lawsuit against Iomega.

As always, the point is, if what's on your media is worth saving, never wait. My customer the other day was lucky, but I can't say what will happen with the next batch of Zip disks. That dreaded click is always looming...

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

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