

Review: Software for recording now, playing later

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This screen shot provided by MediaMall Technologies Inc., shows the computer software Playlater.tv.(AP Photo/MediaMall Technologies Inc.)

(AP) -- If the idea of being stuck on a plane for hours without access to the movies in your Netflix queue fills you with dread, software that lets you record streaming videos from the Web and watch them later on your laptop may be an appealing solution.

That's the idea behind PlayLater, which bills itself as "the [DVR](#) for online videos." It can record content from a number of different online sources - including Hulu, YouTube and Netflix - and save it to your computer. It costs \$5 per month, or \$50 per year. New users can try it

free for two weeks before paying.

If you buy or rent more than a couple of digital videos from Amazon.com Inc. or Apple Inc.'s [iTunes](#) Store every month, PlayLater could sound like a money-saver. And while it's a potentially useful product, it needs a lot of improvement before I'd be willing to shell out for it.

There's also a possibility that websites like Netflix will find a way to block PlayLater. They'd probably want to, since it doesn't jibe with the way they do business. In general, streaming movies are sold for less than ones available for download, so both websites and studios stand to lose from PlayLater. Websites don't want you to skip their commercials, either.

It's unlikely that websites and studios would have legal recourse against PlayLater and its [parent company](#) MediaMall Technologies Inc., since it's been established that digital video recorders (like TiVos) are legal, but you never know. A spokeswoman for MediaMall said PlayLater is affiliated with some companies whose content it streams.

Basically, the software works like this: When you click on a video within the PlayLater application to save it onto your computer, it plays the video in a hidden Internet browser window and copies it from there.

This means it copies streaming video in real time, so you'll have to allow a full 93 minutes to record the pilot of David Lynch's early '90s TV drama "Twin Peaks." If you're saving a video that includes commercials, they'll be in there, too, but you'll be able to skip past them when viewing.

The software, which for now only works on PCs running Microsoft's Windows, is simple to download from the PlayLater.tv website and install. It works with 30 sites, or "channels," ranging from the

aforementioned Netflix, YouTube and Hulu to Cartoon Network, ESPN, Comedy Central and Internet radio service Pandora. For password-protected sites like Netflix, you'll have to enter your login info.

The software is not hard to navigate, but it's ugly and cumbersome with lots of text and few images. You typically have to click through several levels of tabs to find the video clip, movie or TV show you want. Fortunately, some of the channels have a search bar, and when available I found it was usually easier to just use this to find what I wanted.

The resulting videos, which I played back through the Windows Media Player, were somewhat fuzzy and colors are noticeably bland - probably a result of the software copying already-compressed streaming video and then compressing it again. The recordings looked decent when viewed in a smaller window, but weren't sharp in full-screen mode. The recording technology is only a tad better than pointing a video camera at a TV screen, and it shows.

And don't expect to watch these videos on a tablet computer or smartphone just yet; they're saved in a proprietary file format that can only be played on a computer running the software. This is intentional - the company doesn't want you to spread your recorded videos around. But later this year the company hopes to allow playback on the iPad.

And while MediaMall also offers software called PlayNow that can be used to view your recordings elsewhere, such as on a smartphone or tablet computer, it requires an Internet connection and costs several dollars more per month (MediaMall is offering the two for \$8 per month or \$70 per year).

Watching PlayLater videos my PC, I had a number of issues, perhaps indicating my laptop was too taxed to handle playing, recording and using other programs simultaneously. Several times when I tried to watch

a [video](#) while recording another one I could hear the audio but only saw a bright pink screen. And my computer crashed three times while using the program and others at the same time. Installation failed on one Windows 7 computer, and on another, Netflix recording failed.

There were problems with recording, too. Several times PlayLater indicated it recorded an entire TV show when it actually hadn't. In one instance, it recorded just a portion of an episode of the teen drama "Awkward." from MTV. Another time the [software](#) acted as though it had recorded a whole episode of "Glee" from Hulu, but it couldn't have because the show was only available to paid subscribers to Hulu's premium Hulu Plus service.

As much as I like being able to watch movies offline and fast-forward through commercials, PlayLater isn't the right tool in its current state. For things I can't watch now, I'll stick to paid downloads for playing later.

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