Movies on the Run

By MICHEL MARRIOTT

REMEmBER the first Walkman? It has been almost a quarter-century since Sony's portable cassette player changed the way people listen to music on the go. Now another form of entertainment is getting the Walkman treatment. Palm-size portable video players are beginning to change where and how people watch movies, cartoons and music videos.

The gadgets, which play compressed video files on a small screen, are designed to be generally less expensive and more convenient than portable DVD players, which have been available for several years. None of these new-generation players, in fact, play DVD's. Instead, using advances in storage and compression technology, most store video on hard drives or memory cards, much the way digital audio players store music files.

"It's just what happened to music," said Ulrich Neumann, director of the Integrated Media Systems Center at the University of Southern California. "We went from cassette tape to CD's to MP3 on memory chips or tiny hard drives. What is happening now is that you have digital movie files going from DVD's down to probably small micro drives."

A few of these players are already in stores. At the high end, Archos has released AV320 Cinema to Go, a hard-drive-based player that costs $600. At the low end, the toy manufacturer Hasbro unveiled a hand-held player for children last week called VideoNow. The $50 device plays 30-minute cartoons on a monochrome screen.

Yet it is unclear whether the public will want to watch video on a screen the size of a
dollhouse window, with a resolution that is no match for even a standard TV set. After all, some hand-held organizers can show video, but that function has never been a particularly strong selling point.

Watching a movie requires more attention than listening to music, so it is difficult to see how the mobile video players will be used in the on-the-go way that portable audio players are.

Industry experts also caution that providing legal content for the devices is and will continue to be a major obstacle.

Still, several other electronics manufacturers, including ViewSonic and Samsung, have announced plans to introduce video players later this year. And Sony is developing a device, the PlayStation Portable, that will play video and music in addition to games.

But it is another game company, Nintendo, that is hastening the development of these devices, calculating that they will appeal to young people, mostly boys, who are used to playing games on a small, relatively low-resolution screen. The first mass-market wave of these gadgets is likely to piggyback on the Game Boy, Nintendo's hugely popular portable video gaming device.

Nintendo estimates that more than 150 million Game Boys have been sold since the machine was introduced in 1989. Its most recent permutation, the $100 Game Boy Advance SP, released this spring, is just 3 inches on its side when folded and about an inch thick. Most important, it has a bright full-color screen.

Parrin Kaplan, Nintendo's vice president for corporate affairs, said the company recognized the flexibility of its hand-held gaming franchise. "There's so much you can do with it," Ms. Kaplan said.

With varying degrees of support from Nintendo, four electronics companies have developed technologies that use the Game Boy Advance SP's 2.4-by-1.6-inch screen to play anything from cartoon shorts to full-length movies in full-motion video. Some Game Boy video technology is expected to reach the market as early as September.

"It is a new application for the Game Boy Advance," Dan Kitchen, vice president for hand-held development at Majesco, a video game publisher in Edinon, N.J., said of his company's approach to augmenting the Game Boy for video playback.

Called Game Boy Video Pak, the Majesco product consists of special cartridges that appear to be no different from standard Game Boy game cartridges. But when they are inserted into the Game Boy they transform it into a video player, complete with stereo sound, DVD-like controls and full-screen playback.

Mr. Kitchen said the cartridges could hold up to 90 minutes of video, depending on the type of material and how much compression was required. The cartridges will be made by Nintendo and are expected to cost about $20 each.
He said Majesco was negotiating with content makers for Video Pak rights to various films and expected to have five to seven cartridges ready for release by late October.

The early offerings are likely to be feature cartoons, which are far less demanding to render than live-action video, said Mr. Kitchen, noting that the initial target audience for Video Pak would be Game Boy owners, generally 4 to 14. Playing 24 to 30 frames a second, the Video Pak's image quality on Game Boy's small liquid crystal display is close to VHS quality.

TuneIn Entertainment, a Sherman Oaks, Calif., company that already brings full-length television shows and movies to hand-held digital organizers, is taking a different route to Game Boy-based video.

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