Requiem
Parting Words For VHS Tapes, Soon to Be Gone With the Rewind
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VHS -- the beloved videotape format that bravely won the war against Betamax and charmed millions of Americans by allowing them to enjoy mindless Hollywood entertainment without leaving their homes -- has died at the age of 29. It passed away peacefully after a long illness caused by chronic technological insignificance and a lack of director's commentary tracks.

No one knows exactly when this once-valued objet de home entertainment began its journey toward that previously-viewed-video bin in the sky. Some say it was March 1997, when the slimmer, sexier DVD was introduced to American consumers. Others pin the time of death to the week of June 15, 2003, when DVD rentals first topped those of VHS. And there are some -- technophobic, time-warped souls who still keep their Erol's Video membership cards in their wallets -- who argue that VHS isn't deceased at all. It's just, well, resting its eyes.

In fairness, the remains of VHS haven't been interred yet. After all, 94.7 million American households still own VCRs. And more than $3 billion was spent on video rentals and purchases in the United States last year, according to Home Media Research. But if VHS isn't quite dead, it's at least on life support, comatose, all industry signs indicating it will not be resuscitated.

Many of the major studios, including Buena Vista Home Entertainment (which issues Disney titles), Fox and Warner Bros., are phasing out VHS releases. Circuit City and Best Buy stopped selling them online earlier this year, having removed the bulky cartridges from their store shelves in 2002 and 2003, respectively. (Wal-Mart and Amazon.com, on the other hand, have not announced plans to stop carrying the tapes.)

"I would think 2006 is the last year that there are major releases on VHS, and there won't be many of those," confirms Bo Andersen, president of the Video Software Dealers Association, a trade group for home video retailers.

Even Andy Stitzer, the coitus-challenged electronics store worker played by Steve Carell in "The 40-Year-Old Virgin," is savvy enough to know that VHS and the VCR are VCI: Virtually Completely Irrelevant.

"It's a dead technology," Andy tells girlfriend-to-be Trish when she contemplates buying a videocassette recorder.
she contemplates buying a videocassette recorder. "It's like buying an eight-track player."

The following might be the ultimate proof of VHS's demise, though: When "Star Wars: Episode III -- Revenge of the Sith" comes to home video on Nov. 1, it will be available only on DVD, marking the first time an installment in the Skywalker saga is not on VHS. As Yoda himself might say, the life of VHS clearly close to ending is.

And while the prevailing attitude toward this turn of events for most might be, "Gee, that's too bad. So, what has TiVo recorded for me tonight?," it's important that we pause to mourn the loss of this clunky cassette and celebrate the many good times we shared.

Wait and we might get charged a late fee.

The VCR in our minds slowly rewinds to the early 1980s, when the video rental business first exploded. If you lived in the Washington area, you probably frequented an independent rental store like the aforementioned Erol's chain, where the shelves were filled with movies in freakishly tall red cases lined with gray foam, as if the cassettes needed extra padding to protect them from piracy. On one side of the store: all Beta. The other: all VHS.

To continue the "Star Wars" geekout: Frequenting the Beta area was a bit like going to the Dark Side. It definitely seemed wrong, but once in Vader's grip, it was difficult to escape. ("The quality is so much better," proponents would insist. "I find your lack of faith disturbing.") Going VHS, on the other hand, was like joining the Rebel Alliance; all the young guns -- the Han Solos, the Princess Leias -- were there. When VHS eventually triumphed in the mid-'80s, it almost felt like an Ewok celebration. Except it was cooler, as no actual Ewoks were involved.

VHS captivated us because its personality contained so many facets. It was mysterious: How much tape was actually in there? What would happen if you lifted up that plastic flap across the top? If you left a VHS tape on top of the VCR, would it, as your father always insisted, get demagnetized? (You almost sacrificed the household copy of "Sixteen Candles" to find out, but in the end, your loyalty to Molly Ringwald won out.) VHS was instructive. It taught us how to feel the burn with Jane Fonda, dance like the zombies from Michael Jackson's "Thriller" and, later, do Tae-Bo with Billy Blanks.

VHS was maddening. No matter how many times we tried to fast-forward to a certain scene -- the moment when Leonardo DiCaprio sinks underwater in "Titanic," or the fava beans line in "The Silence of the Lambs" -- it never stopped exactly where we wanted. Inevitably, by the time we hit "play," Leo was already dead and Anthony Hopkins was already saying a breathy "Chianti."

And even in this age of DVD saturation, when you imagine someone watching porn, immediately you think: VHS. And recall that black-curtained corner of the video store that was marked "18 and Over Only," with its nervous-looking browsers.

Where's the lyrical magic in the title "Sex, Lies and DVD"? And where would Quentin Tarantino be sans the tape, having skillfully
ripped off everything he saw in every movie he rented while working as a Los Angeles video store clerk.

VHS, occasionally, even turned criminal. In "The Ring" films, a vengeful tape was responsible for the deaths of countless people stupid enough to load it into their VCRs. This was even true in this year's "The Ring 2," in which the plot was not upgraded to hinge on the less-scary DVD format, as its characters were apparently so scared that they couldn't get to a Best Buy.

Still, even with its perversions, its personality quirks, you have to feel some love for the VHS tape. Had it never been born, there might not be DVD, or TiVo, or pay-per-view or microwave popcorn. Without it, 29 years' worth of rainy weekends would have dragged on ceaselessly, movielessly.

As we prepare to bury VHS, we can take solace in the knowledge that its memory will live on. In the current clash between the developing high-definition DVD formats Blu-ray and HD-DVD, we will still hear the echoes of VHS vs. Beta. At every yard sale where a neighbor tries to sell us an aging copy of "When Harry Met Sally" for $1, we will still see VHS's black, plastic face. And on the streets of Manhattan, wherever bootleg videos are being illegally hawked, the wind will whisper the name: VHS, VHS.