

PRODUCT reviews

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Honestech VHS to DVD 2.0 Deluxe

By J.V. Bolkan

There are almost as many reasons to transfer your old VHS tapes to DVD as there are dusty, bulky video cassettes in your collection. Honestech's VHS to DVD 2.0 Deluxe promises to make the task easy. For the most part, it delivers. The software comes with a USB 2.0 external video capture device that makes connecting a VCR or other video device to your computer a breeze. Kudos to Honestech for including cables; not every low-cost package does. I had the device connected to a VCR and my desktop computer in minutes and didn't even need to consult the user's guide. The capture box supports S-Video, RF (cable TV), and AV connections, making it compatible with nearly all video devices you're likely to have in a typical school media lab.

The software took a bit longer to install, and did send me looking into the documentation. Supporting either Windows XP or 2000, the installation is a multi-part ordeal that can get a little confusing, especially if you want to install to a drive or partition other than the default C drive. In addition to the USB device drivers, the installation routine puts the VHS to DVD and My IC-TV Media Center PE applications on your desktop.

Honestech throws in a limited version of My IC-TV that enables you to watch television on your computer monitor, as long as you have a VCR or other video source connected to the

It doesn't get much simpler than VHS to DVD 2.0's opening screen and One Touch Wizard. However, to get the features you want on a DVD, advanced is the choice.



USB capture box. It is severely limited. You can watch in full screen mode, but there are no other options, no saving, no screen capture, no sizeable windows, and no real reason to do this.

The real reason you'd buy this package, the VHS to DVD application does have some useful features. The initial screen gives you two choices: convert a videotape using the simple wizard or advanced setting. The simple wizard works great; you're prompted to put a blank DVD in your burner and then prompted to begin your VCR. You end up with a simple DVD version of the tape that only takes a few minutes (depending on the speed of your DVD burner) to burn after the recording is done.

The advanced option isn't much more difficult, but you get a much higher degree of control, both in capturing the video and in creating the DVD. You can watch the video in a small window (sound will also play through your computer's sound card), and capture specific scenes. You can also set the captured video to be automatically split by pre-set times. Once

captured, you can arrange clips, add transitions, create menus and chapters, then burn the disc.

The simple option isn't terribly satisfying—you get a DVD that is pretty much a copy of the tape with none of the DVD features such as custom menus and chapters. I also had problems on my test system (a 2 GHz XP system that barely exceeds the 1.8 GHz minimum specifications). The wizard would begin copying a two-hour tape, but would stop (once after almost an hour, another time after only a few minutes) and display a message that the source tape was copyrighted. It wasn't; however, there is nothing to be done at that point—you can't resume the copy, you'll need to begin again. I assume the real problem was that my computer may have become overwhelmed.

I was able to copy an entire tape, but only by capturing it in pieces. I didn't have a problem with 30-minute captures, which is just fine; the smaller file sizes are easier to work with. Unfortunately, the editing and DVD authoring features are rudimentary and



Although the advanced mode does provide many common DVD-authoring tools such as custom chapters, menus, and some transition effects, it isn't as versatile or as easy to use as most low-cost dedicated DVD-authoring software.

a bit crude. Even without much feature depth, the interface still manages to be non-intuitive and clunky.

The capture device is a slick gadget and alone is almost worth the \$99 list price. The software isn't such a good value, but with some effort can be used to produce serviceable results. If your classroom or media center is cluttered with obsolete, hard to search videotapes, converting your homemade collection to DVD is a worthwhile goal.

VHS to DVD 2.0 Deluxe

Honestech; <http://www.honestech.com>; Windows XP or 2000; 1.8 GHz CPU

JumpStart Reading with Karaoke

By J.V. Bolkan

JumpStart Reading with Karaoke from Knowledge Adventure is a simple reading program for students ages 4–7. As the name implies, the program uses sing-along activities as rewards and motivation for learning. It sounds like a great idea. Young children love to sing, and by using the included microphone, they can hear and record themselves too. In reality, the lower ranges of the audience for this software will have extreme problems concentrating on reading the words quickly enough to sing. Even advanced readers (like myself) may have trouble until the song is memorized, then of course I'm not really reading, just singing a song.

Students will also probably need to know their alphabet before tackling the program. The software does start with an alphabet song, including letter sounds, but it is pretty fast paced and is more of a refresher lesson. The program is linear, meaning that the lessons progress from letter sounds to simple words such as *cat*, *mat*, and *bat*. A series of learning exercises and keyboard-controlled games earn tick-

Reading with Karaoke presents a well-organized, child-friendly interface. Students complete learning exercises to earn tickets for the karaoke stage.



ets and familiarize students with the words that will be in the next song. For instance, before singing a song about cats, rats, and bats, one of the tasks you must complete is filling a truck with packages labeled with the words.

A cartoon cat named Val (after the company's Voice Activated Learning technology) leads learners through activities. There is ample opportunity for interactivity, but I did find that the voice recognition software was only semi-accurate. I could get away with saying *bat* rather than *cat* or *rat* often. Even when the software does detect a wrong answer, it simply asks again. If you say the wrong thing once more,

it plays back what you said, but puts a checkmark signifying success next to the word. I perversely insisted on saying *dog* rather than *cat*, yet still got reinforcement and a coveted ticket toward a karaoke song.

According to the publisher, the phonics-based lessons are correlated to state educational standards. For older students (those who can already read to some degree), the software will certainly help reinforce concepts and skills such as comprehension, sight words, sounding out words, and building vocabulary.

The cartoon graphics are lively and engaging. The activities are both chal-

lenging (possibly too difficult for younger students) and interactive. The clip-on microphone is fun. No doubt, this software will delight many beginning readers. With more than 20 songs (more are available for download online) there are hours and hours of content.

Reading with Karaoke is available for Windows or Macintosh systems. It requires at least a DirectX 9.0 sound card. Installation was fast and painless. Reading with Karaoke sells for \$19.99. The depth of the lessons and the sheer fun of karaoke make this an excellent buy, especially for students already on the path to fluent reading.

JumpStart Reading with Karaoke
Knowledge Adventure; <http://www.jumpstart.com>; Win/Mac

Webs to Whales Nature Tales

By J.V. Bolkan

Block Publishing's *Webs to Whales Nature Tales* is a series of multimedia CD-ROM "books" for students ages 4–9.

I was able to look at the first two titles in the series, *True Blue Friend* and *The Rainbow Web*, exploring whales and spiders respectively.

Both titles feature gorgeous photographs and illustrations of various examples of whales and dolphins, or spiders and insects. The stories themselves are short but feature read-along passages.

The activities are also fairly simple, but lack of depth is countered by ease of use and engagement. The titles also include reproducible worksheets. At \$24.95 each,



In this screen from *True Blue Friend*, photos of many whale and dolphin species are accompanied by brief, encyclopedia-style descriptions.

these are great resources for early elementary students and beginning readers.

Webs to Whales Nature Tales
Block Publishing
<http://www.blockpub.com>; Win/Mac



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