

HARDWARE REVIEW

On-The-Go Photo Storage

PORTABLE MEDIA PLAYERS



Digital Foci's Picture Porter Elite, a Portable Media Player, features a large 3.6-inch LCD screen, and lets you directly download video or images directly from flash cards.

BY TONY GOMEZ

Next to the iPod and its competition for digital music, the other portable playback devices gaining in popularity are called PMPs (Portable Media Players). They can certainly handle digital music playback, but they also are very adept at handling video clips and digital images. Now you're probably saying that the newest iPod can do that too, and I would agree, but there's "gotchas" in the playback compatibility of videos and some image files.

A PMP is a more versatile device, capable of working with a wider variety of file formats. We recently tested two different PMPs—**Digital Foci's Picture Porter Elite**, and **Kingston's K-PEX 100**. These two models provide a good range of the PMP experience—from the higher-end model from Digital Foci, to the entry-level Kingston model. They each have their own unique features and user interface. Come with us as we show you how these latest PMPs can make your portable enjoyment of digital media more exciting and fun.

DIGITAL FOCI'S PICTURE PORTER ELITE

Digital Foci's Picture Porter Elite represents the second generation of the PMPs that are currently available. The Picture Porter Elite (PPE) is about the size of a paper back book (5.3-in. L x 3.1-in. W x 1.1-in. H) and

only weighs 11-oz. PPE is the bigger brother to the original Picture Porter (which is still available for \$329 for the 20GB and \$399 for the 40GB internal hard drive model). Because of its bigger screen and larger internal hard drives, the PPE is a bit more expensive (\$449 for the 40GB, and \$569 for the 80GB version).

The PPE's most dramatic feature is its large 3.6-in. color LCD display. The LCD display is large enough to enjoy at arms length in an airplane, traveling in a bus, a car, or wherever you might wish to enjoy your digital media. The PPE's Graphical User Interface (GUI) is very Windows-like, with its large icons that select which folders you want to use—Pictures, Music, Video, etc.

But a large display, and a comfortable GUI are only the beginning of the many exciting features. The next is the ability to directly download digital images and video clips from flash memory used in your digital cameras, DSLRs, and camcorders. Unlike other PMPs that usually have a limited number of memory slot types (CompactFlash and SD card), the PPE supports CompactFlash (Type I/II or Microdrive), SD card, MMC, and Memory Stick. That pretty much covers the top four types. If your digicam has an older type of memory card (like SmartMedia), or one of the newer compact forms of SD card or Memory Stick, you can use an adapter that adapts the smaller chip to the standard sized card slot—usually a CF or SD card type.

continued on next page

The PPE can also handle just about every standard for still images: JPEG, TIFF, BMP, and GIF. But the PPE can also handle the RAW image format created by the best of today's DSLRs and digicams. RAW is essentially an unmodified image as captured directly by the imaging sensor, before *any* JPEG compression is applied. The RAW format is preferred by advanced users and professionals alike, because it's the equivalent of a digital negative or digital slide, and offers the greatest latitude in image improvement—far greater than a JPEG captured image. Because there is no standard for the RAW format, some of the newest RAW images from the latest digicams and DSLRs may not be displayable as images, however, they can still be transferred to the PPE for eventual transfer to your computer.

Like almost *all* PMPs, the PPE also has a slide show feature. This allows the user to create interesting slide shows made from their chosen images with pre-selected special transition effects, and music. This slide show presentation is effective enough on the built-in 3.6-in. LCD screen, but it's even better when shared with family and friends. This is easily accomplished by directing the playback to an external DVD recorder, or to the video capture card of your computer. Then, you can burn a DVD of the presentation and share that slide show as a DVD video with your friends or family on their DVD player.

WORKING WITH THE PICTURE PORTER ELITE

Connect the PPE to its provided AC adapter. You don't want the PPE to power down right during a critical download. Next power it on, and insert your memory card into the proper slot. *Note:* The slot for SD/MMC/Memory Stick is actually one slot with multiple connections. Carefully insert the card till it gently snaps in. The PPE will recognize the memory card. If you scan down through the icons that are presented on the main user interface, the last one will be named "No Name," which represents the memory card inserted into the PPE. You'll get an auto pop-up menu of the types of backup available—Full, Photo, or None. Select Full Backup. This creates folders in the Backup section of the PPE's hard drive that are identical to those that are on the actual memory card. The backup process now begins. You'll notice the names of the picture and video files as they are being transferred into the internal hard drive. Depending on the number of files you're transferring, Full Backup can take several minutes. When Backup is complete, you're ready to use the picture and video files.

PPE is also designed to be playback compatible, with a variety of video clips that are created with various digicams and camcorders. The problem is, that there is *no* universal standard for playback of these video clips—some may be in MPEG-1, MPEG-4, WMV v9, or MJPEG. It all

depends on what video formats the digicam or camcorder manufacturer uses. The PPE handles all of the formats mentioned above, however, even if the video format isn't recognized by PPE, at least you'll be able to store it there for eventual downloading into your computer. I found that this was of critical importance for the HD video format recorded by Sanyo's Xacti HD1 camcorder. The HD files recorded by the Xacti take up a lot of memory space on the SD card. Consequently, the SD card was constantly filling up. But, with the handy PPE present, I could transfer the HD video files to the intermediate hard drive storage of the PPE, and then reformat the SD cards for continued recording. I've tested many PMPs, and the original Picture Porter and the newer Picture Porter Elite's are the **ONLY** ones I know that can handle the HD format from the Xacti HD1 camcorder for storage.

One of the coolest features of the PPE is its ability to record EXTERNAL video. This external video source can come from any one you might have—camcorder video, video from your television, or even non-copyrighted material from a DVD. A special Video Input cable is provided to let you connect up your video source. Once your source video is connected, say your camcorder, select the Video Record icon from the Main Menu. Also you need to select the quality of the captured video, there are four settings, and one of them is 640x480 FINE, which is the one you should select for the best capture quality. Click the center of the joystick on the PPE and external video recording begins. You can actually perform live edits while playing back the source video and selecting PAUSE on the PPE and then continuing the record process when the next scene begins.

Once your video has been captured, it resides in the Video Folder and can be selected from the playback joystick. *Note:* Because of a built-in limitation of the Windows operating system, you can record up to 2GB worth of continuous video content before the recording automatically stops, and then it begins capturing a continuation clip where it left off. For a point of reference, I captured a video that was about 2 hours long, and it took up about 2GB at the highest quality setting (640x480 @ 30fps). Note that I could have reduced the quality by half (320x240 @ 30fps) and it would have taken up only 1GB of space—for more video storage.

There's much more to the PPE, including the playback of digital music files: MP3, WMA, AAC, and WAV. All that's necessary to hear these music files is to transfer them into the appropriate Music folder. This can be done with the provided USB cable.

The Picture Porter Elite is a very robust and flexible PMP. It should satisfy just about all your digital still image, video, and slideshow needs. Its also got a very handy way to record and share personal camcorder video with your family and friends.