A Fix for "My Video Won't Play!"

TechBite's columnist Steve Bass writes weekly commentary on the technology products he loves, the strategies for getting the most out of them, and the gotchas that can cause computing misery. Below is an example if his exceptional 'tips'.

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Tricks to get (almost) all videos to play (even dopey ones from Bass).

Gnarly Videos

The shout came from down the hall. "The video you sent won't play." It was my wife using our virtual intercom. "Again!" she said, making sure I understood that the entire IT department at Bass International was needed in her office right away.

PCs usually play most videos, sure. But out of the blue, yours might arbitrarily rear up and rebel, saying oh, no, not *this* one, pal, no way.

Most of the time when you can't play a video, it's because you don't have the right codec on your PC. Ordinarily, you shouldn't have to know about codecs -- it's something Windows ought to handle. But until you can sit down and have some face time with Bill, or heck, *anyone* at Microsoft, and lodge your complaints, you've got to handle things yourself. I'll show you what you'll need in a moment.

First, you need to understand that a codec is a software ditzel that compresses a video on the processing end -- and then uncompresses it on your PC. (This is something cool to bring up at your next dinner party.) There are bunch of popular codecs, and there are just as many, well, not popular ones. *[Are you sure you spelled "ditzel" right? It's not showing up in any dictionary I can find. --Editor.]*

If the doofus who created the video you're trying to watch used an obscure, off-the-wall codec, you'll need to get the right one onto your PC. To complicate matters, some video formats, even using mainstream codecs (most notoriously MOV, MPG, and AVI), can be encoded just a little differently, at say, 119 schlemiels rather than the standard 120 schlemiels. If your player isn't schlemiel-friendly, you may never get to see the video. However, keep reading -- I have two suggestions to help solve your problems.

Make That Video Play

One quick solution is to download the free VLC media player, and use that instead of the default

Windows media player. VLC comes with all the codecs for every media format built in. If you're a Linux or Mac fan, you'll be happy to know VLC is cross-platform. You can download a copy from the VideoLAN site. (Sure, I know, there are dozens of players out and about, but I like VLC because it's clean, quick, unencumbered, and works without much heavy lifting.)

Now if you're happy using whichever media player you're already using, I have a nifty freebie -- a stack of codecs from the Codec Guide site. The most current version of K-Lite Codec Pack is 4.2.5 and the package includes its own player, Media Player Classic. I find it's a handy player to have around: It will play videos I absolutely can't get to work in Windows Media Player, even with all the extra codecs.

K-Lite comes in five models, from a basic version to one with the kitchen sink. The full version, sort of in the middle, is good for most of you; if you're unhappy with Real's player, choose the mega version which comes with the Real Alternative player. Browse through the comparison chart to choose one and click the blue hyperlink on the chart to download it.

Keep an Eye Out
I have a couple of K-Lite installation tips. During installation, select "decode only" (that should be in the first screen) and make sure to select the Indeo driver to get this obscure, but important codec. On the installation routine's Select Components dialog box, uncheck Player in the first dialog box if you want to continue using your current video player.

If K-Lite changes any of your existing video file associations, say, switching playing sound files to its player, you can fix it: From Windows Explorer, select Tools, Folder Options, File Types, and change the file association to the app it was originally assigned to.

BTW, the K-Lite installation removes old and outdated codecs, installs newer ones, and leaves any existing and standard codecs on your PC untouched.

Important codec warning: Many viruses and Trojans masquerade as codecs. *Never* install or download a codec unless your video player suggests it or the codec is recommended by a trusted source, such as a computing magazine or a famous author. Read Alex Eckelberry's Nasty new Trojan changes router settings to get a sense of how this happens. (Alex's security blog is good reading.)

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