



Halfway winner

Sony delivers its first BD-Live ready Blu-ray player, and it's surprisingly affordable. **John Archer** is very nearly impressed



Now here's something you don't see every day: a dedicated Blu-ray player from Sony that's actually worthy buying. Of course, starting my review of Sony's new BDP-S350 with such fighting talk probably looks like showboating. But honestly, while I might have been impressed with the raw video output of some previous Sony Blu-ray players, in other ways they really have been next to useless.

For starters, one or two of them have been extremely buggy. Also, all of them have featured oppressively

slow operating systems. But what's far worse is that none of them have actually delivered the full benefits of the Blu-ray format. Why? Because they haven't been compliant with Blu-ray's Profile 2.0 specification, meaning they can't handle interactive online 'BD-Live' features.

Even though Blu-ray as a format has finally reached a point where it can offer the same level of functionality HD DVD did from day one, Sony has not had a player able to do that functionality justice. Until now.

Slim 'n' lite:
The BDP-S350 finally gives the Big S something to shout about

Firmware

Well, actually 'now' isn't quite accurate. For the S350 is shipping without Profile 2.0 support already onboard! Yes, in a final poignant reminder of just how difficult Blu-ray has found it to cross the finishing line, the S350 will only become Profile 2.0-capable following a firmware update currently slated for an October delivery.

You can't see from there, but trust me: I'm rolling my eyes.

The good news is that this firmware update doesn't have to be



Build quality is rudimentary on Sony's budget BD hopeful

delivered to the S350 via disc. Instead, **you can use the Ethernet port for jacking into your network and entering the brave new world of internet-based extra features** and downloadable firmware upgrades. Halle-blinking-lujah.

Before I go any further, all this talk of upgradability and internet connections brings to mind the PlayStation 3. Sony's games console is, of course, capable of playing Blu-ray discs, and has from the very beginning been able to download firmware updates. These have long enabled it to deliver Profile 1.1 and 2.0 features – so you may think that my apparent 'Sony bashing' thus far seems unfair.

But actually the PS3 merely reinforces my negative stance towards previous Sony standalone Blu-ray decks. For, if the Japanese tech giant can make the PS3, then why in the name of all that's Holy has it taken it so long to get something approaching the game console's Blu-ray features into any bog-standard BD decks?

In fact, so dominant a part has the ahead-of-its-time PS3 played in the

Blu-ray world that ironically it's arguably the S350's biggest rival today, along with Panasonic's DMP-BD55 (see page 70) and the Samsung BD-P1500. Just as well, then, that Sony has finally managed to get its pricing house in order. For at £230, the S350 is actually cheaper than the PS3. In fact, it's also more than £100 cheaper than Panny's BD55, although the Samsung does it give a run.

Mixed bag

It has to be said that there's a build quality price to pay for the S350's aggressive pricing. Its chassis is flimsy, with an unimaginative finish that wouldn't look out of place on a 30-quid DVD player. It's a far cry from the rigid splendour of Sony standalone Blu-ray players of the past.

The story continues to be bewilderingly mixed when it comes to the S350's connections, too. For while the Ethernet jack and an HDMI output capable of delivering 1080p24 and DeepColor are both very welcome, the deck's USB slot proves less desirable. It's here that you must add memory to the S350 via an external USB storage device

AV/CV

Product: Sony's first BD-Live Ready player, and at a budget price to boot

Position: The S350 sits squarely at the bottom of Sony's Blu-ray range, with the higher-spec S550 bringing 7.1-channel audio outputs, DTS-HD MA and included 1GB USB storage to the party

Peers: Samsung BD-P1500; Panasonic DMP-BD35

so that the player will be able to download certain BD-Live/BonusView content. Shouldn't there be enough memory built-in to the player in the first place? And not only does having a memory stick in the back of your Blu-ray deck seem rather clumsy, but Sony's recommended USMIGH MicroVault will set you back an extra £15 or more.

One other less surprising connection compromise finds the S350 devoid of 7.1 analogue audio line outs. But the reality is that such outputs seldom, if ever, find their way onto entry-level Blu-ray decks, being saved instead as a key way of tempting people to buy models higher up a brand's range. In Sony's case, this means the upcoming S550.

Fast and furious

While there appears to be a number of physical compromises slowing down the S350, ultimately it's what goes on under the bonnet in performance terms that matters the most. And in this respect things look pretty rosy.

The S350 features a Quick Start mode that allows it to fire up and be ready for action in under six seconds. This really is a monumental >



Back of beyond: The BD-S350 lacks multichannel analogue outputs, so you'll need to hook it up with a suitably-equipped HDMI AV receiver

improvement on Sony Blu-ray players of the past.

It's also thrilling to find a Blu-ray deck as wallet-friendly as the S350 that lets you fine-tune its performance via such options as MPEG block noise and mosquito noise reduction, and an audio delay circuit. That said, you may never actually use the various performance tweaks for the simple reason that the S350 is a seriously accomplished performer right out of the box.

I ran it side by side with a PlayStation 3, and it quickly became obvious that the S350 is the better picture performer in three key ways.

When it comes to fine detail resolution, for instance, the S350 delivers a noticeably more textured, crisper image. **During *There Will Be Blood* (Blu-ray), the amount of extra pore and hair detail visible during all Daniel Day-Lewis's scenery-chewing close-ups is really quite striking.**

The second ace up the S350's sleeve is its colour fidelity. *There Will Be Blood's* skin tones are intense and believable, while switching to the colour-rich animated favourite *Ratatouille* shows the S350 pumping out startlingly rich saturations.

The final area where the S350 outguns the PS3 is with its motion handling. As the glorious opening credits sequence of *Casino Royale* glides across the screen in 1080p24, the S350 produces a clearly smoother 'glide' that makes subtle details in the graphics clearer.

Turning to the S350's upscaling capabilities, they're actually very good. Standard DVDs certainly look

sharper – provided you stick with 1080i over 1080p, oddly.

Given that it outperforms the PS3, just how does it compare with my existing budget BD favourite, the Panasonic DMP-BD35? Here, it struggles somewhat. The Panasonic's PH4 Unipher processing gives it an edge in the fine detail and colour resolution departments.

Given the S350's rather flimsy construction, I didn't expect much from its audio. But actually it surprised me. CDs are surprisingly transparent and musical, with good timing and none of that mid-range mushiness that characterises many relatively cheap DVD and Blu-ray decks. Movie soundtracks are wondrously dynamic. The player is actually a great match with the brand's STR-DG820 receiver (reviewed elsewhere in this issue), although cosmetically the pair appear to have been produced a continent apart.

Badge hunters may be annoyed that there's no internal decoding for DTS-HD Master Audio into LPCM – but it can at least bitstream these soundtracks over HDMI.

Almost there

The S350 still isn't the finished Blu-ray article. But there's no doubt it's a big step in the right direction for a company which has been strangely ineffectual when it comes to standalone BD players. The sheer quality of its picture performance, and its seductive price tag, make the hassle of potentially adding a memory card and having to upgrade the deck to BD-Live seem much easier to bear ●

→ Specifications

- Video upscaling: yes up to 1080p24
- Multiregion: no Region B (BD); R2 (DVD)
- HDMI: yes v1.3
- Component: yes 1 output
- Multichannel phono audio: no stereo only
- Digital audio: yes coaxial/optical/HDMI
- SACD/DVD-A playback: no/no
- Dolby TrueHD/DTS-HD decoding: no/no
- Bitstream output: yes
- Profile 2.0: yes but only after firmware update due in October
- Dimensions: 430(w) x 220(h) x 60(d)mm
- Weight: 2.9kg
- Also featuring: MPEG NR; Mosquito NR; general NR; picture presets; x.v.colour support; Ethernet; recessed USB port

→ Tech Labs

DVD playback

- Audio jitter: 194.5ps 1 2 3 4 5
- Video jitter: 3ns 1 2 3 4 5
- Video S/N ratio (interlaced component Y): -67.2dB 1 2 3 4 5
- Chroma AM: -72.1dB 1 2 3 4 5
- Chroma PM: -62.8dB 1 2 3 4 5
- Chroma Crosstalk: -59.1dB 1 2 3 4 5
- Response @ 5.8MHz (component, interlaced): -4.4dB 1 2 3 4 5
- HQV Benchmark Jaggies test: PASS
- HQV Benchmark Text Crawl test: PASS

A strong set of results, with good HQV and reasonable signal-to-noise and Chroma AM/PM offset by a shocking frequency response. And the Sony's standby power consumption is surprisingly high, too, so watch your electric bills



HCC VERDICT

- Sony BDP-S350
- £250 Approx
- Price check: www.techradar.com
- Highs: Good picture quality; decent sound; efficient upscaling
- Lows: Unimpressive build; needs to be updated for BD-Live; DTS via bitstream only
- Performance: 1 2 3 4 5
- Design: 1 2 3 4 5
- Features: 1 2 3 4 5
- Overall: 1 2 3 4 5