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MaxTrack CS 20 Media Switcher

More video sources than you can shake a remote at?

by Chris Hall published on 27 March 2009

Sometimes sorting out all your different video sources and getting them into your display in a tidy fashion is a real nightmare. It might be that your HDTV only has a single HDMI input, which many older displays do, or that your minimalist installation calls for cables to be kept to a minimum. For many this means turning to an AV receiver, which can be a costly investment, and doesn't always cover all the bases, especially if you want to connect your PC into the equation.

The MaxTrack CS 20 Media Switcher looks to resolve your video input problems by giving you an upscaling switcher box that gives you six inputs and a single HDMI output.

Measuring 340 x 160 x 40mm, it is slightly smaller than most of your other home cinema components, but the construction is solid enough. Ranging across the front of the CS 20 you'll find an IR receiver for the remote control, six buttons for manual input selection and a button each for resolution select and power.

Around the back is where the real functionality becomes clear, giving you 2x HDMI, 2x VGA and two AV inputs, the latter of which can be either Component, S-Video or Composite.

In terms of audio this is carried through on the HDMI out wherever you can input it. Essentially this means that if you connect a PC to the VGA input you'll be left without sound, and there is no way of patching in sound from another input, so you'd have to connect a speaker to your source.

Connecting up the CS 20 is easy enough, simply plug into the inputs, hook up your display and you are ready to go. Power on and the buttons are backlit in blue when selected. Press the input you want and there is a pause of a few seconds before it is displayed.



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The resolution button on the front lets you cycle through the available output resolutions: 480p, 720p, 1080i and 1080p. In terms of input resolutions, the CS 20 documentation claims to support pretty much everything and certainly we encountered no problems with games consoles, DVD and Blu-ray players in our tests.

VGA, however, wasn't quite so straightforward. We tried hooking up a MacBook and a PC and in both cases found it took a bit of fiddling with settings so the CS 20 would display them happily. Connecting straight to the screen with a VGA cable was a much easier option, but if you don't have that choice then this certainly works.

The manual does nod to this fact in several locations, so the experience will likely differ depending on what sort of device you connect.

The quality, however, was very good. We've seen HDMI switches in the past that introduce noise, speckle, or totally downgrade your video quality. This wasn't the case with the CS 20 where HD content from a Blu-ray player came through with barely any discernible difference from the original.

On standard DVD, however, there was a noticeable pixelation when played through the CS 20. We tried turning the upscaling off on the DVD player, which didn't help. Conversely, the CS 20 seemed to remove some noise present in the upscaled DVD image.

On the remote control you'll find a noise reduction button, which cycles through three levels - there is no "off" option - and no matter how much we tested it, we couldn't find much difference between the levels, either on high-quality signals or lesser ones.

One function that does make a distinct difference is the picture mode. Rather like picture presets you get on many TVs, you have the choice of dark, normal or clear, which is a quick and easy way to balance out the different brightness of

At a glance

What is it?

Media switcher

Good

Connection options, good quality HD, fast switching

Bad

VGA can be fiddly, price, low-resolution sources can be noisy

Verdict

It does what it says on the tin, whilst preserving your HD content pretty well. We did find more artefacts introduced from lower-quality inputs, whilst VGA will take some fiddling to get the best result

Price £248.99

Our score

7/10

Your score

?/10

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sources without having to adjust the TV itself. It's really handy for darker games from a console, so you can brighten it up with the "clear" mode and see a little more detail.

The remote itself is responsive enough, but it is typical of the cheap remotes you get with many devices and you'll need to keep track of it as at this size it will be easily lost. It will allow you to switch aspects between 16:9 and 4:3, as well as make some basic adjustments to colour, saturation, hue and so on.

There are also no cables supplied, so you need to make sure you have everything on hand to make your connections.

VERDICT

In terms of upscaling this won't take low-quality inputs and magically transform them into high-definition. But we did find that Composite video was perfectly watchable on our 40-inch display although we'd advise you do as much as you can to use HDMI or Component to get the best out of your quality video sources.

What the CS 20 does is give you a simple single point to bring your video sources together to feed them through to your display via HDMI. You'll need to consider your audio options for VGA (unless you are only using that for PowerPoint or similar, or have a separate arrangement for audio).

Overall though, it does what it says on the tin, whilst preserving your HD content pretty well. We did find more artefacts introduced from lower-quality inputs, whilst VGA will take some fiddling to get the best result.

At this price, however, basic users may be better served by an entry-level AV receiver, particularly if VGA is not too important.

Thank you to SatShop for the loan of this product.