

VST FireWire External Hard Drive

BY NILS MENTEN

Most advances in technology seem to come a little at a time. Once in a while, however, something new comes along that completely blows away the current stuff, like CDs did to vinyl records. VST's external FireWire hard drive has done just that, instantly rendering SCSI and IDE hard drives old school.

FireWire isn't exactly new—Apple first developed the draft specification as a next-generation data transfer interface for high-end imaging applications like digital video, and it was in this arena that the final "IEEE 1394" specification was initially introduced. But as processor speeds and computer subsystems have continued to push ahead in performance and throughput, FireWire has become the natural choice for the next generation of general-purpose workstation input/output. True to form, Apple quickly harnessed the new technology, making it standard on all its current desktop computers. VST is among the first manufacturers to use the interface in peripheral storage devices, including FireWire hard drives and Iomega Zip drives.

We tested the company's 10GB external hard drive and came away impressed.

Unpacking the drive, the first thing you'll notice is the small size and simplicity of the drive itself—at 5 1/2 inches deep, 3 inches wide and a scant 3/4 inches high, it's about the same size and shape as a Global Village external modem. The second

thing you'll notice is the absence of anything to fiddle with. There are no switches; the drive uses an intelligent, energy-conserving standby mode when not in use, and unlike SCSI, there are no IDs or jumpers to set before you can use the drive. There's no giant power plug—in most cases, the unit gets all the power it needs from the host computer, right through the same cable that carries data. There's no fan, as the unit incorporates a clever heat-dispersing design that makes it unnecessary; as a result, it's nearly silent in operation. There are two compact, fiddle-free "1394" sockets, one for connection to your workstation and the other to daisy chain to other devices. There's also a socket for the popular Kensington cable lock, just to keep the pocket-size drive out of anyone else's pocket but your own.

Installation couldn't be simpler. Run the installer program on the included CD, restart, and then plug the drive in. A few seconds later it will appear on the Mac's desktop, ready for use. We had to update our Mac's FireWire support extensions to version 2.2.2, but VST's Web site had all the information we needed to

locate and download the necessary components from Apple's site. The update was quick and painless. Once installed, it's just another drive on the desktop—drag and copy files to and from it as needed.

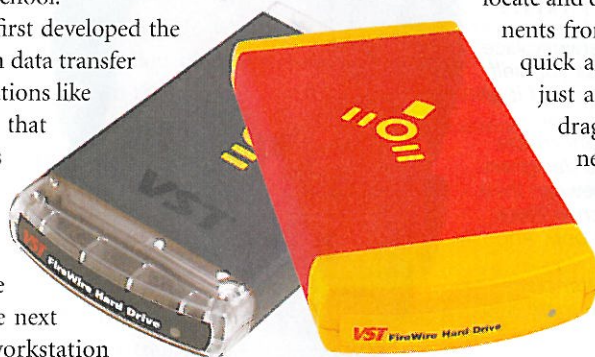
If you have to move the drive to another workstation, simply unplug it and go. No need to shut down or restart. And as useful as this can be with large-capacity fixed

storage for sneaker-net of large amounts of files or image data, it also makes the sharing of a single removable-media drive or CD burner within a workgroup entirely practical and cost-effective and a heck of a lot more convenient to boot.

To benchmark the drive's performance, we assembled a worst-case copy job consisting of more than 100 files of varying sizes, totaling 1GB of data, and copied the files to and from a 400MHz Apple Power Macintosh G4. We then repeated the test using an external 7,200rpm SCSI-2 drive connected to the same machine, through an Adaptec SCSI-2 adaptor card. The VST FireWire drive completed the copy operations to the G4's internal IDE drive an average of 20% faster than the SCSI-2 drive. But in fairness to the SCSI setup, using an Ultra-Wide or other high-capacity SCSI version in our tests probably would have eliminated the gap completely. We'd expect improvement of 30% to 50% over a typical Macintosh SCSI-SCSI transfer, depending on the processor and bus speed of the host machine. However, for video editing with a digital camcorder that uses the 1394 interface, this is the only way to go.

With a retail price of \$559 for the 10GB drive as tested, VST is commanding a slight premium over SCSI drives of comparable capacity and I/O performance, but that seems pretty fair to us given the unit's unique features and advantages over external SCSI drives. If you're an owner of a FireWire-equipped G3 or G4 Power Mac, it's time to cut the cord from SCSI and not look back. □

Nils Menten is a partner at iMarc L.L.C., a Web development and consulting firm located in Newburyport, Mass.



RATING

★★★★★

Platforms: Macintosh, Windows

Verdict: The future of storage has arrived, and it fits in your shirt pocket.

List Price: \$559 10 (GB Model)

Contact: VST Technologies Inc., 978-263-9700, www.vsttech.com