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Netflix Subscribers See Red Over Cracked Blu-ray Discs

By Priya Ganapati | April 16, 2009 | 7:15:33 PM | Categories: Blu-Ray



Red Alert! Netflix Blu-ray disc subscribers may want to inspect their red envelopes a little more closely before popping the discs into a player.

Hundreds of subscribers to the company's movies-by-mail service say they have received fractured Blu-ray discs that won't play -- and that it's happening at an alarming rate.

"Over the last two months, we've had probably four to six Blu-ray discs in a row arrive with small cracks at the edge of the disc that render it unplayable," says Pete Brown, whose wife has been a Netflix subscriber for three years.

Blu-ray discs differ from standard-definition discs in the way they are produced and how they store data. Standard definition DVDs are two clear polycarbonate discs, each 0.6mm thick, sandwiched together with the data recorded on a very thin metal substrate in between, explains Adrienne Downey, senior analyst at research firm Semco.

Blu-ray is a single 1.1mm polycarbonate disc that has the data encoded at the top. Blu-ray discs have a 0.1 mm coating on top of the data layer to protect it from getting scratched. Because the coating is much thinner than the 0.6mm sandwich used in DVDs, it could be more vulnerable to scratches and cracks.

"The coating is supposed to protect the discs but it could also be making them more brittle," says Downey. "Ultimately Blu-ray is a new technology and they are still working the kinks out of it." Downey says it will be another year or two before the whole Blu-ray ecosystem is entirely problem-free.

But Blu-ray technology can't take all the blame for the Netflix customers' problems. Far fewer BlockBuster customers are complaining about their Blu-ray discs, which suggests that Netflix has a few issues of its own handling the discs.

Renting Blu-ray movies from Netflix has been particularly challenging for Brown and his wife. Take the



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case of the Oscar-nominated hit *Babel* that was in Brown's queue. The disc arrived cracked, and then the replacement disk that Netflix sent was damaged. But that's not the end of the story: The replacement to the replacement was also damaged. "At a point, my wife was like, maybe they are sending us same thing to us over and over again," says Brown.

Reports about customer problems with damaged Blu-ray discs come even as Netflix [plans to increase rental fees](#) for Blu-ray discs by about 20 percent at the end of April. About 1 million, or 10 percent, of the company's subscribers rent Blu-ray movies. The company currently ships 2 million red envelopes a day.

Netflix user complaints first flared up in late 2007 as [early adopters complained](#) in online forums of receiving damaged discs. Now a fresh wave of users say they're having similar problems.

The problem is not pervasive, says Steve Swasey, Netflix's vice-president of corporate communications. "Our percentage of Blu-ray disks that members receive that are not playable is a fraction of a percent," he says.

So what's causing the cracked Blu-ray discs? The reasons could include tough love from the local post office, which sometimes sticks the envelopes into automated sorting machines. It could be the Blu-ray disc manufacturing process or even the relative newness of the technology.

"It could be in the specific (Netflix) hub that ships them or it could be in the postal carrier or it could be the ways these subscribers are handling it," says Swasey.

Older titles on Blu-ray discs certainly seem to be at greater risk for cracks, says Grant Brown (no relation to Pete Brown), a Netflix subscriber who has been following the issue for more than a year. "From what I have seen with my account and those of my friends, the newer the Blu-ray disc, the better the chance that it has not been cracked."

That's not always the case, however. Tom Turley, a Netflix subscriber in Seattle, says he received two cracked Blu-ray discs in a row last week -- both with a new movie.

Meanwhile, Netflix customer representatives have been pointing fingers at the post office. On Grant Brown's blog, users say [Netflix encourages them to complain to their USPS](#) if they receive cracked discs.

"It almost looks like Netflix doesn't want to deal with the problem and they are pushing people to complain about the postal system," says Grant Brown.

Netflix says it takes user complaints seriously. Every DVD that is reported damaged is pulled out of circulation, says Swasey. And while some users suggest a [more sturdy mailer for Blu-ray discs](#), the company is not in favor of it.

"When we see the breakage for Blu-ray to be so infinitesimally small of the total ships, it would be cost-prohibitive for us to change the shipping method," says Swasey. "We do everything to drive costs down."

Photo: Grant Brown/Mars Box


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No mystery -- the envelopes Netflix uses are extremely unforgiving. Blockbuster's envelopes are larger, providing a paper buffer on the top and bottom, whereas the Netflix discs get slammed right on the disc edge.

Posted by: **Wil** | Apr 16, 2009 6:13:15 PM

We recently moved and had never had problems at our previous address. Since we have a new Post Office we have received 5 broken discs in a couple of months. I think that the discs get stuck in their little mailman bins and then get bent when the mailman thumbs through them.


Posted by: **Ray Randell** | Apr 16, 2009 6:57:56 PM

No surprise bluray is a POS. If Toshiba hadn't made the mistake of letting a woman lead the charge of marketing a product primarily to MEN then we would still have high-quality HD-DVD, no Java Runtime incompatibility BS and discs that didn't cost \$30 a pop in a (now) monopolistic market. Suck it Sony (and your crappy laptop batteries too)

Posted by: **Nick** | Apr 16, 2009 7:25:12 PM

I've received seven(?) unplayable cracked bluray discs in a row from Netflix. Until now Netflix has been great but when I called to ask about the problem they told me it was the Post Office's fault and there was nothing they could do. Considering they are charging me an extra 4 bucks a month now I was completely enraged. Maybe I should switch to Greencine or (thought I'd never say it) Blockbuster.






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