Head2head

An often overlooked, but essential, piece of kit is an AV switching box. Rik Henderson looks at two models and wonders how he ever coped with a single Scart socket…

Many flatpanel manufacturers are finally responding to the needs of a multi-equipped household by adding a wealth of connections round the back of their sets or connection boxes, but for some it still never seems enough. When you have a DVD player, digital recorder, VCR, games console (or three), Freeview, cable and/or Sky+ box, Scart switching can be a most physical activity.

There's only one solution in this circumstance, regardless of your TV's connectivity; a switching box. Cheap Scart splitters can be both non-RGB compatible and have a reputation of degrading the signal. Also, you don't want to have to manually change inputs constantly, so remote access is essential.

Two likely candidates have caught *HCC's* eye, and we put them through their paces. (Note that they are similarly priced; even though the One For All SV-1610 has an RRP of approximately £70, it's widely available online and in shops for less.)

ONE FOR ALL SV-1610
◆ £70 (Approx)
◆ 0031 53 488 80 00
◆ www.oneforall.com

One For All is best known in the UK for its Kameleon range of remote controls and independently-powered, interior antennas, all of which have a good reputation. It's also plunged into the Scart control centre market with, what appears on paper, a well-featured switching box.

In looks, it doesn't match any kit I can think of and is the AV equivalent of a bull mastiff; short, squat and terrifyingly ugly. The silver, bevelled fascia has too many buttons for its basic purposes. It's almost as if it was a case of, 'How do we make this look important given its diminutive and, ultimately, unappealing physique?' 'That's easy, stick on more buttons – it worked for Darth Vader's chest.'

One saving grace is that the large, obtrusive circle in the middle actually doubles as an IR receiver that allows for remote control access. Another interesting and highly commended feature is that, though no remote is included, the SV-1610 can learn signals from any handset you care to use (I used a Philips Pronto, but you could always utilise a defunct control). Alternatively, you can assign a button on each of your AV kit's remotes (such as 'On') which will make the box switch over as soon as you wish to use a new source.

There is an auto mode that, when activated, senses which feed is live and switches accordingly. Unfortunately, though, you have to switch off your last viewed source beforehand as this function doesn't recognise newly live feeds if another is already on.

The meat of a switching box, though, is its connectivity and, barring one or two omissions, there's enough here for most uses. Four RGB-capable Scart inputs are supplied with one of the input channels complemented by composite audio and video, and S-video sockets. On the output side, there's one Scart (RGB or otherwise), composite AV and S-video, but you can't convert with the SV-1610, it's all simply plug-through. So you can't get a picture using the S-video input if outputting through Scart and vice versa. This can make for lots of fiddling with connection combinations, which can be frustrating.

I was also unimpressed with the picture quality (even when using top quality cabling). There seems to be little differentiation between the sharpness of signal when using an RGB or composite feed – it adds a minor level of noise to both. Also, when I tested it on both an old CRT and LCD TV, powerful signals occasionally lost stability when blaring out bright scenes (white, essentially). In some instances the CRT's EXT channel even switched off and on.

Distortion of audio was far less of a worry as it only happened with sources using a high output level. But, considering the SV-1610's other foibles, it's hardly a boon. And, to further rub salt in the wounds, it comes with a two-pronged plug – you'll have to invest in an adaptor.

JOYTECH AV CONTROL CENTER
◆ £50 (Approx)
◆ 01753 496 700
◆ www.joytech.net

Videogames peripheral company Joytech has several AV products now

SYSTEM SPECIFICATIONS COMPARED

ONE FOR ALL SV-1610
Specifications: AV switching box; remote-learning mode; RGB pass-through; electrical switching; auto-detect
Connections: Four RGB-enabled Scart inputs; composite AV inputs; S-video input; RGB-enabled Scart output; composite AV outputs; S-video output
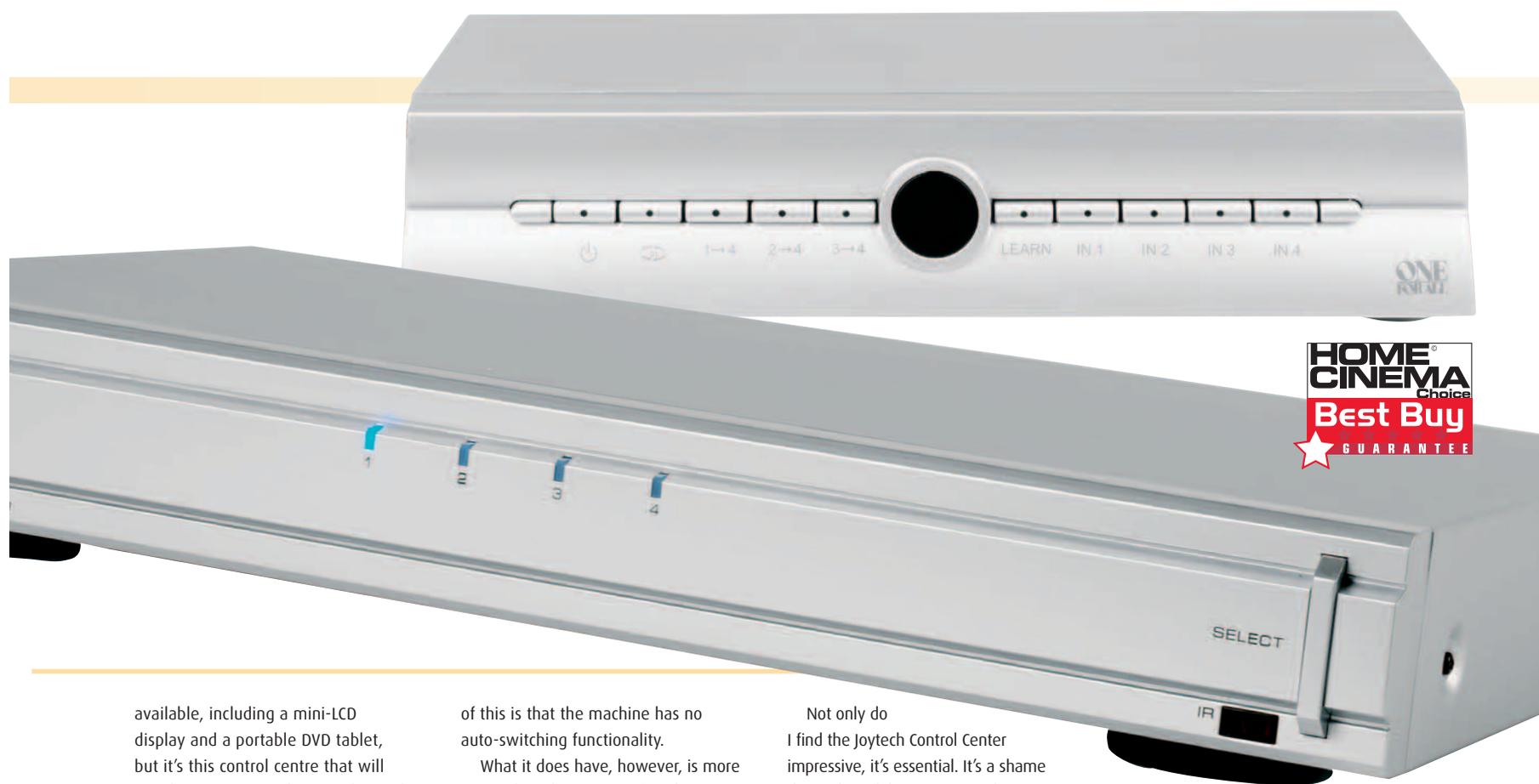**Dimensions:** 293(w) x 67(h) x 150(d)mm **Weight:** 4.5kg

JOYTECH AV CONTROL CENTER
Specifications: AV switching box; RGB pass-through; Signal Regulator Technology; credit card-style remote control
Connections: Four RGB-enabled Scart inputs; four composite AV inputs; four S-video input; four optical digital audio inputs; RGB-enabled Scart output; composite AV outputs; S-video output; optical digital audio output
Dimensions: 430(w) x 55(h) x 255(d)mm **Weight:** 2kg

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available, including a mini-LCD display and a portable DVD tablet, but it's this control centre that will see the company making ripples in the home entertainment market.

Whereas the SV-1610 looks like a shoebox with buttons, the AV Control Center is, possibly, the sleekest AV accessory I've seen in a long time. The silver front panel is punctuated by just a few well-spaced and tactfully designed buttons, plus futuristic blue and green glowing LEDs. It's also the same size as conventional home cinema kit, so it racks up nicely. And it's also available in jet black, if you prefer.

Getting it up and running is much easier than the One For All because it comes with its own credit card-style remote control. It can also be used by technophobes as there's only five buttons to cope with (which also made it easy to program into my Pronto controller). The downside

of this is that the machine has no auto-switching functionality.

What it does have, however, is more inputs than the SV-1610. Four bays on the back each have inputs for RGB-Scart, S-video, composite AV or, for the first time on a switching box, optical digital audio. And matched outputs make up the final set.

The pièce de résistance is the quality of signal. Not only is it perfectly matched on every source, with no interference when all feeds are live, Joytech's signal-boosting circuitry actually seems to improve colour performance. When fed directly, lower-end DVD players have a tendency to be mildly washed-out, however, the Control Center brings them to life. I'm not sure why, as it's not a listed feature, but it's certainly a plus in my book. Also, I ran a Center through another with absolutely no loss in image quality, opening up even more input possibilities. Sound transfer is also faultless.

Not only do I find the Joytech Control Center impressive, it's essential. It's a shame that it doesn't have any auto functions, but with such a well designed remote control it is only the laziest of viewers who can't bothered to press a button to change channels.

Conclusion

This is a surprisingly mismatched head 2 head. Initially, it was the price difference that worried me most, especially when the SV-1610 proffered so many features, but they're clumsy in use, with some seeming superfluous. Rather, it's the Joytech Control Center, at a fraction of the RRP, that is head and shoulders above in performance. Specifically, in picture quality and general versatility.

It would be nice to see a switching box that can also handle prog scan-enabled component ins/out, but until then, I'm more than happy with Joytech's deck ■

RATINGS

ONE FOR ALL SV-1610
Highs: Auto-switching modes; remote-learning feature
Lows: Unstable pictures; mild sonic distortion; ugly

Connectivity	★★★
Performance	★★★
Build	★★★
OVERALL	★★★

JOYTECH AV CONTROL CENTER
Highs: Sleek design; easy to use; fantastic picture transfer
Lows: No auto-switching

Connectivity	★★★★★
Performance	★★★★½
Build	★★★★
OVERALL	★★★★½

The Joytech remote has four sets of inputs...

The credit card-style remote control is a real bonus

The SV-1610 has an IR sensor, but you have to provide your own remote

One For All offers the same number of video inputs, but no digital audio