



■ RENTALS

We can rewind: television saves the video stores

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VIDEO may have long ago killed the radio star, but now it seems TV is rescuing the video store.

Over the past decade video stores have been slowly disappearing from high streets around Australia, forced out by growing competition from piracy, internet downloads and pay TV.

But the burgeoning popularity of television series on DVD is helping to keep the video store from becoming a romanticised, retail relic. Rentals of TV series at one chain have jumped 70 per cent in the past year.

Network Video in Stanmore may end up being the last one standing in a corner of Sydney's inner west. At least eight other video stores nearby have closed down in the past decade.

Despite experiencing the same slow reduction in business as the rest of the industry, Network Video's manager, Charlie Fenton, a devotee of cult TV shows such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Deadwood*, said the appetite for renting TV series was still growing. "We used to get one copy of a show where now we'll order three," he said.

The cable dramas that have never been shown on free-to-air TV in Australia, or only in late-night time slots, are particularly popular. "[The cable channel]

HBO is a phenomenon – they're really big business."

The latest hit is the US cop show *The Wire*, which, bolstered by word of mouth, had "gone nuts" in the past month, Fenton said. Several episodes of the Australian show *Love My Way* are in the store's top 20 most popular rentals, up there with blockbuster films such as *The Matrix*.

At Video Ezy, rentals of TV series have risen by 70 per cent the past year, and are still growing. Paul Uniacke, the managing director of Franchise Entertainment Group, which owns both Video Ezy and Blockbuster, said video stores had to meet the demand for TV series to keep afloat.

Along with internet terminals, coffee shops and retail services, his stores will soon be offering high-speed downloading services so customers can take movies home on their MP3 players.

Fenton and his co-manager, Deanna Reading, have bucked the trend of the large chains by retaining much of their back catalogue and investing in cult, foreign and classic movies. The store has even retained many hard-to-find movies on VHS.

Fenton is optimistic that, like vinyl, videos and DVDs will never completely lose their appeal. "I think some people will always like to come and browse, and handle the [title] itself."



Word of mouth ... the quality US police series *The Wire*.



Australian drama ... *Love My Way* is a popular rental.