

Use of the zoom rocker switch on the handgrip is another matter. The G lens provides for soft zoom starts and stop — unlike the Z7's hybrid Zeiss zoom, which sacrificed electronically assisted finesse for mechanical control. At the default zoom speed, the G lens travels from 4.1mm to 82mm in 2.2 seconds. At the optional high speed (found in the menu settings), the G lens zips from wide to tele in 1.65 seconds. This appears extraordinarily fast to the eye compared to previous camcorders such as the Z1, which had a similar zoom-travel speed of 1.7 seconds but only a 12X zoom range to cover in that time.

The rocker switch is shorter and stubbier than the Z1's. The Z7 had enlarged its own rocker switch compared to that of the Z1, which was a good move. A larger rocker switch always provides better leverage for more subtle zooming control. Using the Z5's shorter rocker switch, I noticed that zooming sometimes got away from me — producing a fast, racing zoom when a slow, measured zoom was intended. This happened sometimes when the G lens was in high-speed zoom mode and when the rocker switch was manipulated by hand from above, as for instance when the camera is on a tripod. I did get better over time at controlling the more compact rocker switch, although the option of a third, slower zoom speed might be useful. Rocker-switch technique, after all, is highly personal.

The G lens iris is six-bladed and nearly circular, providing natural circular blurs for bright points of light. The iris ring itself, which is reversible in direction, otherwise mimics the mechanical control of a real iris. Or, in a new Exposure mode, it can also combine control of gain, iris, and shutter speed so that by simply turning the iris ring, the Z5's sensitivity can travel the extremes of sensitivity from f/1.6, 21dB, 1/30 second to f/11, -3dB, 1/2000 second. That's right: The Z5 introduces minus gain settings of -3 and -6 for improved signal-to-noise. Surprisingly — and this remains to be seen — Sony says that dynamic range is not affected. It will be interesting to see if use of minus gain, a high-end technique, makes inroads into low-budget productions.

Briefly, other improvements over the Z7 include the return of a built-in stereo mic, which the Z7 lacked (It can be switched into a single channel if an external mic occupies the other channel — how great!); a small transparent cover over the mic switches on the XLR input pod; a rotary-style switch for camera/VCR on/off instead of the Z7's hard-to-see micro switch; an extended and almost imperceptibly slow 90-second duration added to Shot Transition; and peaking that appears smoother, less coarse than the Z7's. Color peaking has been added too, and I found red peaking to be so useful, it became my personal default.

There's a new optional local-area-network controller (LANC) for the Z5 that crane and jib-arm owners are going to love. The RM-1000BP Remote Commander looks like (and is named like) a game controller. Dual handgrips in a batwing design are topped by large rotating knobs, which control iris and focus. Between them is a rocker switch for zoom control. In addition to record start/stop, most of the Z5's camera functionality is controllable from the RM-1000BP — including menus, picture profiles, expanded focus, shutter speed, gain, and white balance. Also, there are six assignable buttons. Although LANC is a fairly primitive wire protocol — only a single function can be controlled at a time — most operators zoom, then focus, then set exposure a step at a time anyway. A minuscule price to pay for the remote-control freedom the RM-1000BP brings to the Z5. (With a firmware upgrade, it also works with early Z7s and HVR-S270s — no upgrade required for the latest batch of Z7s and 270s — but it is incompatible with the DSR-PD170, HVR-A1, HVR-Z1U, DSC-V1, and HVR-HD1000.)



*The battery well of HVR-Z5U is deeply recessed to fully enclose large NP-F970 InfoLithium battery so that the HVR-MRC1 Memory Recording Unit using CompactFlash can attach flush to rear.*



*The Z5 brings back the built-in stereo mic that is missing from the Z7.*

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