

■ Home Entertainment & the Internet

The entertainment market has exploded with options since we last discussed home theater PCs in June 2008. Back then, setting up your own media center PC probably seemed daunting. Now, streaming services and hardware devices coupled with high speed Internet connections have made watching videos and live TV shows simple.

If you want to watch a recent release, a quick scroll with your TV's remote can have you watching in seconds. If you want to record your favorite shows every day without programming it each time, no problem. If you want to watch a show on your Smartphone or tablet while waiting for the bus, you can without needing a lot of tech know-how. All of these activities are now incredibly easy and convenient, making entertainment fit your lifestyle rather than being a wish or afterthought.

■ Tip of the Month

Streaming video needs a lot of bandwidth. If you have a Smartphone or tablet and want to use it for multimedia applications using 3G or LTE rather than Wi-Fi, be mindful of how much bandwidth you use so you don't get blindsided by your carrier's overage charges.

AT&T and Verizon have both replaced their 3G unlimited plans with data caps. Five plans offered now limit you to less than 200 MB, 200 MB, 2 GB, 5 GB, or 10 GB per month. Here are some activities and how much bandwidth they require (on average):

- Streaming a 2-hour movie from Netflix or Hulu = 2 GB
- Listening to Pandora for 1 hour = 50 MB
- Watching a 1 minute YouTube clip = 1 MB
- Using Skype for 15 minutes = 3 - 15 MB

Note: 1,024 MB = 1 GB

For this newsletter, we'll go over three categories of options: 1) Hardware/Software, 2) Streaming media and, as a tried and true standby, 3) DVDs. Keep in mind that nearly all of these options require an Internet connection near your TV. Wired connections will be more reliable than wireless connections.

Hardware / Software Options

Roku

Netflix originally released this hardware device to stream videos on demand. Wired and wireless versions are available. Just announced is a Roku 2 which adds support for 802.11n wireless connectivity and includes a remote to play video games (the remote is similar to the Nintendo Wii remote). Compatible services include: Netflix, Amazon On Demand, Hulu Plus, Mediafly, MLB.TV, NHL GameCenter, Pandora, and Flickr. Prices for the device start at \$59. Netflix and other subscription fees are additional. → <http://www.roku.com>

Windows Media Center (WMC)

WMC is Microsoft's software for streaming and playing media content. It requires hardware; put together your own HTPC (Home Theater PC), install it on MS Xbox 360, or install it on a properly configured laptop (great option for portability and transporting content). WMC is automatically included with Windows 7 Home Premium, Professional and Ultimate editions. WMC enables you to stream videos, copy CDs and DVDs, create slide shows with music, listen to the radio, record TV shows, share photos, and more. → <http://windows.microsoft.com>

■ Website Worth Watching

- ▶ www.speedtest.net - Want to find out just how fast your Internet connection really is? Go to this website and perform a test to determine your modem's actual upload and download speeds.

Boxee by D-Link

Offers two choices: buy a Boxee device or put Boxee software on a PC, Mac or Linux. Either option will allow you to watch any show or program that is broadcast over the Internet. If you buy the Boxee box, just attach it to your TV with an HDMI cable. Then connect the Boxee to your Internet connection via modem or router. Turn the power on and you're set to go. Watch thousands of shows from Internet sites such as Netflix, Vudu, Major League Baseball, NHL, and more (additional subscription charges may apply). In addition you can stay connected through Facebook and Twitter, browse the Internet, download apps, and view files on your computer. The Boxee device costs \$199.99 – no monthly subscription required. The Boxee software is a free download. → <http://www.boxee.tv>

Slingbox

The Slingbox is a hardware device that allows you to watch TV shows and movies anywhere you have an Internet connection. Connect it to your TV and a receiver such as a DVR, cable set top box or satellite receiver, install the software on a PC or Mac, and you can watch shows on your TV, computer or mobile device. Two versions are available: Slingbox SOLO for standard definition content or Slingbox PRO-HD for high definition content. The PRO-HD version has a built-in TV tuner and offers multiple inputs for ease of use. Slingbox Mobile is also available which allows you to watch live or recorded TV on a mobile phone or tablet over a Wi-Fi or 3G connection. Prices start at \$179.99 which includes 90 days of technical support.

→ <http://www.slingbox.com>

TiVo

TiVo is an advanced DVR (digital video recorder) that replaces your cable set top box. It can record and stream live TV and movies from cable providers as well as Netflix, HuluPlus, Amazon Instant Video and Blockbuster On Demand. It can also access streaming music stations, play music stored on your PC, play YouTube videos, access web based photo services like Picasa and Photobucket, and allows remote access via the web to record shows at any time. Prices start at \$99.99 for the TiVo Premiere which provides up to 45 hours of record time. An additional monthly subscription charge applies. → <http://www.tivo.com>

Apple TV

This hardware device allows you to stream videos and TV shows, listen to music, view photos, and rent HD movies and TV shows. Apple TV centers around iTunes so you'll need an account to get started. The latest version of Apple TV includes AirPlay which allows remote access through an iPhone, iPad or iPod. Compatible services include: iTunes, Netflix, YouTube, MLB.TV, NBA, Flickr, Mobile Me, and Internet Radio. Apple TV costs \$99. There are no monthly subscription or contract fees. → <http://www.apple.com/appletv>

Sony PlayStation 3 (PS3)

Traditionally, the PlayStation 3 is a gaming device but it is also a Blu-ray player and can be configured to stream video and TV shows. Compatible services include: Netflix, Vudu, Hulu Plus, MLB.TV, NHL GameCenter. It can also stream music, video, and photos from networked PCs and attached USB drives. Prices start at \$299.99. *Note: Nintendo Wii and Microsoft Xbox 360 can also connect to Internet services to stream video but they do not have as much functionality as the PS3.*

→ <http://us.playstation.com>

Blu-ray Players

Most newer Blu-ray players offer access to online streaming services such as Netflix, Vudu, Amazon Instant Video, Pandora, and YouTube in addition to playing Blu-ray discs and DVDs giving you the most versatility. Prices vary but expect to pay around \$150.

HDMI cable

If you want the simplest, most cost effective option, simply connect your PC to your TV with an HDMI cable (if your PC doesn't have an HDMI port, you'll need to purchase and install an HDMI card). HDMI provides both audio and video signals and offers the best transfer quality compared to s-video, component, or RCA cables. With your PC on, open the content you want, e.g., a movie you've already downloaded or a video on a website, set your TV to be the monitor, and view any content playing on your PC on your TV. Cost: ~ \$10

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Video Streaming Options

The following options allow you to watch video content online without worrying about discs or purchasing additional hardware. Keep in mind that the speed of your Internet connection will affect the quality of your streaming service. Make sure your connection is fast enough to accommodate streaming. Test your connection by visiting <http://www.speedtest.net>.

Netflix

Netflix offers two options for watching video content: 1) receive DVDs via mail or 2) stream video to an approved hardware device such as a Roku, Xbox 360, PS3 or Wii. As of July 12th, Netflix changed their video subscription plans. There will now be three plans offered:

- 1) DVDs by mail – Unlimited DVDs (1 DVD out-at-a-time) will cost \$7.99/month
- 2) Streaming content – Unlimited streaming will cost \$7.99/month
- 3) Both DVDs by mail and unlimited streaming – For both services, the cost is increasing to \$15.99/month

These plans are effective immediately for new subscribers and will take effect on September 1st for current subscribers.

The biggest drawback to Netflix is the content especially on the streaming side (there are more options available on DVDs). If you prefer B&W movies, older TV shows or PBS specials, you'll be content. Before signing up, browse the selections to see if the movies you want are available. A little research beforehand will save you some potential frustration if the movies you want aren't available on the format you choose.

→ <http://www.netflix.com>

Hulu and Hulu+

Hulu offers a streaming video service over an Internet connection. The benefit to Hulu is that videos can be watched on any Internet connected device with a screen (monitor) including PCs, TVs and portable devices. The free version has many ads. The paid version has fewer ads and costs \$7.99/month. Hulu is in buyout talks now so their service may change in the near future.

→ <http://www.hulu.com>

Apple iTunes

iTunes is another pay-per-view option. Standard and HD selections are generally \$3 - \$5 and can be rented for 24-48 hours. You can watch shows on Apple devices or TV sets equipped with Apple TV set top boxes.

→ <http://www.apple.com/itunes>

Amazon Instant Video & Amazon Prime

Amazon offers two programs for watching/buying video content online. The Instant Video service rents movies and TV shows for \$1 - \$5. Selections are available from 24 hours to seven days depending on popularity. Amazon Prime is a special subscription that allows you to stream unlimited content plus it provides free 2-day shipping on all your Amazon purchases. Amazon Prime costs \$79/year.

Coming in summer 2011, Prime members will be able to stream 2,000 CBS TV episodes bringing the total of free content for Prime members to over 8,000 shows. Amazon's total collection includes over 90,000 selections to rent or buy. Like Netflix, the movie choices are limited although new titles are being added on a regular basis. Best bet is to browse the selections before signing up to see if the service offers enough compelling choices.

→ <http://www.amazon.com>

YouTube

You'd be surprised how much time you can spend on this site. Most submissions are from amateurs and last only a couple of minutes but there are some real gems that are worth watching. In addition to the random submissions from general folks, there are also many professional videos on the site lasting a half hour or more. You can watch YouTube videos for free on any device connected to the Internet. You may experience buffering disruptions depending on your Internet connection speed. → <http://www.youtube.com>

Blockbuster

They haven't closed up shop like Hollywood Video did and they now offer Blockbuster by mail services, as well as on demand streaming and downloads. Most streaming movies cost \$3.99 or less and allow instant

Streaming Options ... continued

access. You'll need to register your hardware device you intend to use – many options are available such as certain HDTVs, Blu-ray players, game consoles, DVRs like TiVO, mobile devices, and PCs. Check their website for specific devices they support:

→ <http://www.blockbuster.com/download/devices>

Video on Demand

If you have a cable TV service account like Comcast (Xfinity), you can watch movies and TV shows available on their website. Premium content is viewable based on your subscription level. Most movies are \$4.99 for new releases; \$2.99 for older shows; TV shows are free. → <http://xfinitytv.comcast.net/>

DVDs

If you're more old school and can't seem to get the hang of streaming digital files, there are still plenty of places to buy, rent and borrow DVDs.

Redbox

For those interested in getting full use of their DVD and Blu-Ray players, these movie and game rental kiosks are showing up in more and more retail areas. For \$1-\$3 per rental payable with a credit card, you can get current movies and video games on disc. Most Redbox locations can be found in grocery stores, drug stores, discount retailers, mall locations, etc. You must return your selection in 24 hours or get charged per day your titles are overdue.

→ <http://www.redbox.com>

Conclusion

If you're looking to increase or modify your home entertainment options, there's never been a better time. Several plug and play options like the Roku or Apple TV will have you up and running in no time. If you're looking for something more full featured and customizable, Windows Media Center will give you a lot of versatility. If you want something to ease into this digital craze, try the streaming service from Blockbuster or video on demand from your cable company. And then there's the can't-beat-the-price option of simply connecting your PC to

Vudu

Vudu is an online video rental store that offers streaming-on-demand. The service enables you to buy or rent digital copies of videos from its library to play on Vudu approved hardware devices such as the Sony PlayStation 3, Boxee, and certain Blu-ray players and HDTVs. Benefits: No monthly fees, no contracts, no late fees; simply pay for what you want to watch. Vudu was purchased by Walmart last year and is now integrated with their website in addition to being a standalone website. Video rental prices are \$2 - \$6 depending on the quality and age of the video. HD quality new releases cost more than older, SD versions. → <http://www.vudu.com>

Blockbuster

Blockbuster now offers the ability to rent and/or purchase DVDs directly from their website. Most DVD titles cost \$4.99 to rent for 7 days – you can return the movie to your local store or in the postage paid envelope.

→ <http://www.blockbuster.com>

Your local library

Most libraries have a wide assortment of DVDs including new releases, documentaries, kids movies, dramas, comedies, etc. Best of all, they're free with a membership card and will usually allow you one to two weeks rental time.

your TV with an HDMI cable. As long as you have an Internet connection, you'll be able to watch anything you see on a website on your TV. If there seems to be too many options, give us a call and we'll help you pick the right solution.

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