

Tech Talk

Navigating the world of technology one gadget at a time
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Digital Media Players

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What is a digital media player, and why would I want one?

A digital media player serves as a source of audio and video material for your television and home theater system. It hooks up like a VCR, DVD player or Tivo, and it can often be used to get movies, television, and music from the Internet.

This can be a great boon if you've missed last night's critical episode of your favorite prime-time drama, or if you don't want to head out into a wintry Chicago night to pick up a movie from the video store.

Among the technically savvy crowd, it's the ability of these devices to liberate digital media files from the confines of personal computers which makes them appealing. Many people have dozens, if not hundreds of images, videos and songs on their home computers but would much rather sprawl on the sofa in front of a big screen TV than squint at a 17" monitor while sitting on an office chair.



The Apple TV is perhaps the best known digital media player.



The Apple TV's easy-to-use interface shows the different types of media you can view.

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What kind of digital files can these boxes play?

Capabilities vary widely in digital media players. Some, such as the Apple TV, play a few selected file formats out-of-the-box, while others, such as models from Mvix and Popcorn Hour, play a vast assortment of video types. Examples of popular video types include MP3 and AAC for audio, XviD and MPEG for video, and JPG and GIF for images.

The casual user who hasn't amassed an extensive collection of media files probably won't notice the lack of broad support for file formats, but if you have a lot of files already, take a close look at player specifications to see if the media types you have are supported.



Digital media players by Mvix play a wide variety of media files.

My new HDTV has a computer input. Why don't I just bring my personal computer into the living room?

This is exactly what some people do. Home theater enthusiasts often prefer the extra functionality that a home theater personal computer (HTPC) provides. With a true HTPC, you can *record* television like a Tivo, not just watch it. You can also reply to email, send instant messages, check sports scores and compose documents from the comfort of your recliner. There are downsides to this approach, however:

- **Price:** To get good results from an HTPC in the living room, you need a respectable graphics card, digital sound output and a speedy processor. A properly configured home theater computer can easily cost upwards of \$1,000. In comparison, set-top boxes can be found for well less than \$500. Some capable units are even under \$200.
- **Noise:** In a quiet room, computers can be oppressively loud. In contrast, set top media players make little noise. You can build an HTPC to be fairly quiet by using special fans, video cards and hard drives, but these items can add 10% to 25% to the cost of the machine.

- **Energy cost:** A computer playing video in your living room can consume more than 200 watts per hour, particularly when you are watching high-definition video. Some set-top boxes use less than one-tenth as much energy to run. They also generate much less heat.
- **Size:** While some home theater computers come in fancy cases designed to look in a stereo system, they still are incredibly bulky compared to set-top media players. Consider this – the smallest home theater computer capable of displaying high-definition content would be about the size of a large stereo receiver. In contrast, many set-top media players are about the size of a thick hardcover novel.
- **Portability:** It's relatively easy to take a set-top media player on the road for use on a friend or family's television. The same cannot be said for most full-fledged computers.

While there is much to recommend having a real computer in your living room, many people find the minimalist approach of a digital media player appealing.

I've heard that some videogame consoles can play movies and music. Is this true?

Absolutely. You may have a digital media player in your home and not realize it. Some game consoles, like the Microsoft Xbox 360, allow you to play videos and music from your home computer network. The Xbox 360 also lets you purchase, download and watch movies and TV shows using Xbox Live Marketplace, an online store accessed by the game machine.

In comparison to most digital media players, videogame consoles like the Xbox 360 are larger, noisier and more power-hungry. Still, they are an improvement over most home theater computers in each of these categories.

Can they play high-definition (HD) video?

Some can, but many can't. It takes a powerful video processor to play these files, which probably explains why HD-capable media players are somewhat rare. In fact, many a full-fledged

home theater computer has cried uncle when faced with a high-definition video. The computer's processor bogs down while trying to decode the video, making the picture jerk and stutter.

The Apple TV and the Microsoft Xbox 360 are two popular digital media players which will gracefully play HD video. Another intriguing HD-capable media player, the Popcorn Hour A-100, can easily handle HD files yet costs less than \$200.



The Popcorn Hour A-100 has the power to play high-definition video yet has a low, market-jolting price tag.

Which one should I get?

There's no easy answer. If possible, test each of the players you are considering on a TV similar to the one you have at home to give you an idea of picture quality and ease-of-use. If you have a large media library already, you might look at models with extensive file format support, but if you're starting from scratch, the Apple TV, with its refined interface, is a solid choice.

Players which have a network connection have a significant advantage over those without one. With a network connection, it is easy to access the videos and music already on your home computers as well as accessing new media from the Internet.

If you have questions, comments or suggestions, you can visit me at the Reference Desk, contact me via email (moetting@hinsdalelibrary.info), or call me at 630-986-1976.

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