

Turn any PC into a media center

All you need is the right software, and possibly some extra hardware, to give your machine new life as a jukebox, a high-def digital photo frame, a movie theater, and a TiVo clone.

Rick Broida (ITWorld) 11/08/2008 10:22:35

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Your PC already plays music, and your hard drive holds every digital photo you've ever taken. And you probably watch hours of video on Hulu, Veoh, or YouTube.

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Wouldn't it be nice if you could corral all that stuff within one attractive, easy-to-use interface? One that's large enough for you to see (and control) from the couch? And, hey, while we're at it, how about adding TV and DVR features to the mix?

You can do all that and more by transforming your PC into a self-contained media center. All you need is the right software, and possibly some extra hardware, to give your machine new life as a jukebox, a high-def digital photo frame, a movie theater, and a TiVo clone.

You don't necessarily need to buy new hardware, and the software part of this upgrade could be easier than you think. In fact, if you're running Windows Vista Home Premium or Vista Ultimate, you're set: Microsoft baked Windows Media Center right into the OS. Mac OS X Leopard users already have basic media-center software in the form of Apple's Front Row, though third-party alternatives are also available. And Linux users have several free options, including Freevo and LinuxMCE.

All of those applications scan your PC for photos, music, videos, and the like, and then present them inside an oversize, TV-friendly interface (commonly known as a 10-foot interface, meaning it's easily viewable from the couch). So when we talk about turning your PC into a media center, we mean installing software that finds, catalogs, and plays your media files--and looks good while doing it.

Note: In this guide, I'll focus exclusively on ways that you can turn your existing computer into a media center.

Center of Attention

Step one is to choose a media-center program--though as noted previously, you may already have one.

The most obvious choice is Windows Media Center (WMC), which--despite being a Vista-bundled freebie--offers a rich feature set and a dazzling interface. With it you can view photo slide shows (complete with Ken Burns-style pan and zoom effects), watch DVDs and videos, browse your music library by cover art, and connect to various online services (including movie-download stores CinemaNow and MovieLink).

WMC also supports up to four TV tuners for DVR-like viewing and recording, and it can archive recorded shows to DVD. Of course, not everyone has Vista Home Premium or Vista Ultimate, and even folks who do might want to check out the alternatives.

The US\$80 SageTV Media Center for Windows offers a more TV-centric experience than Windows Media Center, including an integrated Google Video viewer and instant commercial-skipping. Pair it with the US\$30 SageTV PlaceShifter add-on, and you can stream all your media (including live and recorded TV) to any PC with a broadband Internet connection.

If you'd rather dip a toe in the media-center waters without spending any money, check out MediaPortal, a free application that's every bit as powerful as WMC. It can timeshift and record TV, play videos and music, run fancy slide shows, tune in radio stations (both FM and Internet), and even play games such as Tetris. It's compatible with Windows XP and Vista.

Macintosh users have choices as well, though they're a bit limited in TV and DVR features. The OS X-bundled, remote-controllable Front Row serves up music, videos, photos, and DVDs, all couched in a dazzling turntable-style interface. But it doesn't support TV programming, even if you add a tuner. For that, look to MediaCentral, a US\$30 program that performs all the best media-center tricks and can play/pause live TV too. (Unfortunately, it can't record shows for later viewing.) Don't have 30 bucks to spare? CenterStage is a community-developed program that, among other things, can play recorded TV shows now and promises more TV features (including an electronic program guide) in the future.

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Tune In

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The very idea of turning your PC into a TV might seem a little nutty. After all, what family wants to gather 'round a smallish LCD in the den to watch Chuck or The Office? And what living-room entertainment center would look good with a desktop computer wired to the HDTV? Fair points, to be sure, but consider this: A PC equipped with a TV tuner can also record shows, TiVo-style, and then burn them to DVDs for archiving. Some media centers can also copy recorded shows to such portable players as iPods and Creative Zens, which TiVo charges extra for.

If your PC happens to be a notebook, you can watch recorded shows while you're on the road (and mock fellow travelers who paid US\$1.99 on iTunes for a single episode of Battlestar Galactica). Finally, you always have the option of connecting a set-top "extender" to your living-room TV, giving you all the goodness of your media center without your actually having the computer there (more on that later).

The key ingredient is a tuner. Relatively inexpensive and easy to install, they're available in both PCI (internal) and USB (external) flavors. They support both analog and digital sources, too. An analog tuner can receive standard-definition cable or satellite signals, while a digital tuner affords access to over-the-air (OTA) digital broadcasts and/or QAM signals; the latter are unscrambled digital channels (usually just local ones, but high-definition) delivered via standard cable.

The OTA option is good because it provides high-def channels free of charge (bite me, cable company!), though it requires a decent antenna. (Visit AntennaWeb.org to see whether a simple set of rabbit ears will suffice or if you need higher-end hardware.) If you're already subscribing to cable, QAM may deliver the same high-def channels, no antenna required. But it might also require you to use the tuner software that came with your tuner card to view and/or record broadcasts, as not all media-center programs natively support QAM.

The Hauppauge WinTV-HVR-2250 is a PCI card that comes with a pair of hybrid digital tuners, meaning they can decode both analog and digital signals (QAM included). In addition, it comes with a plug-in for watching and recording QAM channels via the Windows Media Center program guide--a major plus for Vista users.

If you need an external tuner, consider the SiliconDust HDHomeRun, which provides a pair of digital tuners for either OTA or QAM broadcasts. Interestingly, the tuner connects to your home-network router, not to your PC, so it can pipe live TV to nearly any media-center PC in the house. Plus, it's compatible with both Windows and Mac systems (though the latter require Elgato's EyeTV, sold separately).

Want something a little more travel-friendly? AVerMedia's AVerTV Hybrid Volar Max is a USB tuner about the size of a flash drive, and it supports analog, OTA, and QAM sources.

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Extend Your Media

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A media center PC is at its best when it's connected to a big ol' TV like the one in your living room. Of course, that means having a desktop or notebook PC in your living room, which is both an inconvenience (since you no longer have your computer wherever you were accustomed to using it) and a decor killer. You can solve both problems with a media-center extender, a box that streams media from your PC to your TV.

The D-Link MediaLounge DSM-750, for example, is a slim set-top box that connects to your home network via ethernet or 802.11n Wi-Fi. Like many extenders, it's designed for use with Vista's Windows Media Center, and it duplicates the WMC interface on your TV. As a result, you get the same experience as if you were sitting in front of your PC. The DSM-750 streams live and recorded TV (assuming you have a tuner), videos, photos, and music, all at resolutions of up to 1080p. However, it can't stream DVDs, owing to copy-protection restrictions. If you want to add DVDs to the mix, consider the Linksys DMA2200, a similar product that incorporates its own DVD player.

For a helpful guide to the latest media-streaming options, see Becky Waring's "The New High-Def Streaming Tools."

If you're a fan of console video games, you might already own a media-center extender: The Xbox 360 offers such a capability right out of the box. It can play DVDs, too. You might want to add Microsoft's \$20 Xbox 360 Universal Media Remote, though, as trying to navigate WMC with the standard Xbox 360 controller isn't much fun.

Speaking of remotes, they're available for computers as well—for the desktop in the den, the notebook in the hotel room, and so on. Pinnacle Systems' Remote Kit for Windows Media Center pairs a full-featured remote control with a USB infrared transceiver that plugs into your PC. It also comes with an IR blaster so you can use your computer in conjunction with a set-top cable or satellite box. Notebook users may prefer the travel-friendly Siig Vista MCE ExpressCard Remote, which tucks away inside an ExpressCard slot when not in use.

Plug In and Play

If you want to make the most of your media center (particularly your Windows Media Center), pile on the plug-ins. These user-developed extras add all kinds of cool features, and the vast majority of them cost nothing to use. For example, mceWeather provides local weather conditions, forecasts, and even satellite imagery, all integrated into the WMC interface.

Netflix subscribers can take advantage of the new WatchNow feature by installing the MyNetflix plug-in for WMC. It lets you browse and watch the movies in your queue and add new ones as well, again within the comfy confines of the WMC interface. (Interestingly, Netflix hired developer Anthony Park after taking a look at this plug-in.)

Tired of fast-forwarding through commercials in your recorded shows? WMC users can choose from several utilities that scan each recording and actually delete the commercials. Lifextender works entirely in the background and can scan shows manually or automatically. MCEBuddy is a bit more advanced; it includes an option for converting scanned shows to a variety of video formats (including the iPod-friendly H.264). Both utilities are free.

Want even more plug-ins? WMC enthusiast site The Green Button maintains an extensive list of plug-ins and applications. Meanwhile, MediaPortal and SageTV users can browse a smattering of plug-ins from their vendors' Web sites as well.

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