Move over TiVo, MythTV is here

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Frustrated by the slow, advertising-laden cable experience provided by AT&T Broadband, programmer Isaac Richards took matters into his own hands by coming up with his own solution to the problem.

That was in 2002, and since then his MythTV project has grown into a full-fledged effort to build personal video recording systems from readily available computer components and the open-source Linux operating system.

These devices, known as MythTV boxes, are similar in function to the popular TiVo media recorder and provide many of the same features as the TiVo such as the ability to schedule recordings, rewind, fast forward, pause and play live video in real time.

Unlike the TiVo devices, the MythTV project is a work in progress with its end goal centering on the idea of creating a low-cost home-entertainment control unit that can be as extensible as the user would like it to be. Having reached several concrete milestones as of 2005, a community of open-source software developers actively works to expand the overall functionality of the device with new uses being explored as the device's underlying software continues to evolve.

For example, a video module within MythTV's software may control the playback of video while music and DVD-management programs provide additional bells and whistles. Internet-based information can be accessed through a Web browser while a phone module supports Web-based telephone calling and a game emulator allows the user to emulate video-

game software.

The devices, which follow a home-built persuasion, can typically be purchased for less than $500 in computer components, assembled and then installed with free software downloaded from the Internet to provide full functionality. Once more or less limited to enthusiasts who had to search intently for parts with which to build the device, several hardware vendors have recently begun to provide packages for this market.

Where software configuration for the MythTV project has been technical, something that had to be fought with and sorted out, steps have been made in making the setup process easier. The KnoppMyth project is an effort to simplify installation of the MythTV software -- an installation CD-ROM handling the lion's share of configuration for the MythTV box.

Despite the fact that personal video recorders such as MythTV units are seen as something of a hobbyist's interest, this has become viable commercial ground to fight for. In 2005 research firm Smith Barney estimated that only slightly more than 6 million U.S. households use digital video recorders such as a TiVo or its Replay competitor. The firm has forecasted that by 2010 nearly half of U.S. television households, or 58 million homes, will use them.

"I think it is about freedom," said Cecil Watson, the programmer behind the KnoppMyth project. "Before building my own PVR, I thought about purchasing a TiVo, but it didn't have all the features I wanted. I wanted an all-in-one solution that could store my music and photos. A solution that could grow with me as time progressed."

Watson then pointed out the MythTV project's extensible architecture, which is beginning to include software modules that allow the devices to

be Internet-controlled, allow for videoconferencing and listening to podcasts, and generally support additional types of media and functionality.

High-definition television support seems to be the next major milestone for both the television industry and the MythTV project. Recently, efforts have gone under way to provide support for high-definition television computer cards that can record and play back video content at full quality. While a much-desired feature, this has helped fuel the debate regarding the use of personal video recorders such as MythTV boxes as devices used in copying and distributing copyrighted material.

"It is possible they could make a law to ban any PVR, period, because it could aid in piracy," said Brandon Beattie, a Utah-based programmer and one of the lead developers working to incorporate high-definition functionality into the MythTV project. "The popular example is, 'Shouldn't we ban cars since they kill people or aid in robberies?'"

Beattie went on to say there is a constant effort to achieve a balance between interests looking to retain control of copyrighted material and those looking to add functionality to the MythTV project's software.

Attention has been paid to vendors that cater to the personal video recorder market. Some have received accolades for being prescient enough to see an emerging market while others have earned criticism for providing ready-made hardware packages to a project that may or may not be used for forms of media piracy.

"We're dealing with a lot of project companies that are using our units to build their own system ... everyone has their own way," said a representative of iDOTpc, a computer vendor that sells a configuration popular with users involved in the MythTV project and looking to build their own personal video recorder devices, in response to the potential

controversial use their product may be associated with. "Our product is suitable for a lot of different projects."

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