

Digital media players reach out

May 24 2010, By Jefferson Graham

Hard-drive companies are on a new mission to do more than just back up your data. Now they want to bring you and your digital content into the living room.

For that, you can thank the growing collection of digital media -- photos, videos and music -- that largely has replaced CDs, DVDs and photo prints.

To expand beyond the basic drive, top manufacturers Seagate, Western Digital (WD) and Iomega have quietly introduced a new product category: the digital [media player](#). The device is a vehicle for moving digital content from the computer to the living room; some of them don't even have a storage feature.

Seagate's new GoFlex TV (\$130, out in June) and Iomega's ScreenPlay HD Director (\$169 and \$249) go one step further. The GoFlex also accesses online video site Netflix's collection of more than 20,000 movies, and streams them directly to the TV. ScreenPlay works with Roxio CinemaNow. The concept is similar to a connected Blu-ray player, which can display Internet programming in addition to Blu-ray and DVD discs.

Beyond the living room, Western Digital also has an app for Apple's [iPad](#) and iPhone, which lets you view photos stored on your networked Western Digital drives while you're out.

The push beyond the basics helps the storage giants expand their

potential audience. "If we can show people how to do more with their [digital content](#), that helps the consumer and it helps Seagate," says Seagate Vice President Darcy Clarkson.

Beyond the new [Netflix](#) connection, Seagate has updated its media player line by changing the name from FreeAgent Theater to GoFlex TV. Another change: The new media players will have an open slot to slip in a Seagate drive.

The units plug directly into the television and use Wi-Fi to access movies, photos and videos from your computer.

With the push to watch high-definition video on big, flat-panel living room TV sets, the media player has come into focus as a solution to a problem many hadn't foreseen: how to view home-grown HD content on the TV.

The highest quality high-definition 1080p video shot on a camcorder will only be viewed in HD if the camera is plugged directly into the TV, or if the project is edited and saved to a Blu-ray disc and played on a Blu-ray player. Save the high-definition project to a DVD, and the video is now in standard definition.

Most computers don't come with Blu-ray burners, and external models are expensive, so some videophiles are looking to the media player option instead.

But a word of caution: If you were hoping to download movies from an online store such as Amazon's Video on Demand and watch on your media player, you'll be out of luck. The Seagate, Iomega and WD models won't play such copy-protected files.

Meanwhile, the basic hard-drive business has "bounced back

dramatically," says Kurt Scherf, an analyst at Parks & Associates.

Seagate and Western Digital, the top manufacturers, both have shipped more than 50 million drives this year. That's up from Seagate's 38 million and WD's 32 million at the same time a year ago.

Fueling sales: robust computer purchases and higher-capacity drives at lower prices. A portable 1-terabyte drive (1,000 gigabytes) can now be picked up for around \$100. Two years ago, \$100 would have nabbed you a 500-GB drive. A 1-TB drive has room for up to 400,000 photos, 500,000 songs and 150 hours of video, [Western Digital](#) says.

The 500-GB is Western Digital's best seller, says WD Vice President Jim Welsh, but he thinks the 1-TB will soon overtake it. "People are trying to figure out the limit of their storage needs," he says. "They think they have enough, but then they need more."

Welsh says consumers are buying multiple drives. "They've gotten so affordable that one drive is for video, another for music, and so on," he says.

Scherf thinks the next step for the storage companies is to expand into mobile.

Smartphone manufacturers mostly have tapped more expensive solid state memory, which is used on the best-selling [iPhone](#) and Android handsets, for instance.

Hard drives are known to eventually fail, especially when dropped. To get in with the mobile crowd, the companies would have to convince handset manufacturers of "improved robustness of the drive" and of the cost savings that might come with a cheaper drive, Scherf says.

"You're looking at a market of 1 billion handsets a year," he says. "If they could just get a sliver of the market, it would be huge for them."

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Citation: Digital media players reach out (2010, May 24) retrieved 23 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-05-digital-media-players.html>

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