

# Q&A: Apple gets serious about set-top TV product

September 16 2010, By Troy Wolverton

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Apple earlier this month announced it is refurbishing its living room strategy by updating its Apple TV set-top box.

Apple TV has long been relegated to the dark corners of Apple's product lineup. The device was its attempt to let customers of its popular iTunes service watch movies or listen to songs bought there in the living room on their big-screen TVs and home stereo systems.

But Apple TV, like other such Internet-connected devices, has found few takers. Apple CEO [Steve Jobs](#) himself has called it a "hobby," not a full product line, and Apple has devoted relatively little attention to it. While the company has regularly updated its Macs, iPhones and iPods, it's made few changes to Apple TV since it unveiled the device in fall 2006.

Until now. Apple TV is getting a major revamp. Apple added new features, shrank the device to one-quarter its former size and cut its price by \$130 to \$99.

Whether the company has gone far enough, though, is an open question. Apple isn't using the device to tap into a cloud-based music and movie service that it's rumored to be developing. And users still can't add additional services or applications to it -- at least not without hacking its underlying software.

I plan to review Apple TV when it's released later this month. Until then, here are answers to some of the biggest questions about the device.

*QUESTION: What is Apple TV?*

ANSWER: It's a set-top box that allows users to watch digital videos, listen to [digital music](#) and view digital photos on their living-room entertainment systems. The device connects to your television using an [HDMI cable](#), to your audio receiver via HDMI or optical audio cable and to an Internet router via an [Ethernet cable](#) or Wi-Fi.

*Q: Other than price and size, how is the new Apple TV different from the previous model?*

A: Unlike its predecessor, the new Apple TV doesn't have a hard drive. That means users can no longer store movies or songs locally on the device. Instead, the new Apple TV only plays content that is streamed to it over the Internet or from another gadget.

Apple TV users can no longer purchase videos from iTunes; they can only use the gadget to rent them. Consequently, Apple is now offering TV episodes for rent, not just for purchase. Users also can now watch streaming videos from Netflix. And they can use a feature called AirPlay to stream a movie or TV show from an [iPhone](#), iPad or iPod touch to Apple TV.

*Q: Will users of older Apple TV models be able to use any of the new features?*

A: No. Apple isn't providing a software update for older Apple TV systems.

*Q: What are the terms for renting videos?*

A: Apple is charging 99 cents for high-definition television shows. Movie rentals start at 99 cents for older movies in standard definition.

For recent releases, the typical charge is \$3.99 for standard-definition movies and \$4.99 for high-definition films.

With both television shows and movies, users have 30 days to start watching the video. Once they start watching a TV show, they can watch it as many times as they want within 48 hours before it will expire. With a movie, they have just 24 hours once they press "play."

*Q: In what resolution will Apple TV transmit high-definition videos?*

A: Apple TV supports videos with a resolution of up to 30 frames per second at 720p. It does not support 1080p video.

*Q: Can users still purchase videos from iTunes and can they watch them on Apple TV?*

A: Yes. Apple will still sell both television shows and movies in the iTunes store. Consumers can stream those movies or television shows to Apple TV from a computer or iOS device.

*Q: What can you watch from Netflix and what are the terms?*

A: Apple TV connects to Netflix's streaming video service, which offers thousands of movies and television episodes in both standard and high definition. To watch the Netflix videos, Apple TV users will have to subscribe to Netflix. The company's lowest-cost plan is \$8.99 a month, which includes access to all its streaming videos and the ability to borrow one DVD at a time from Netflix's library.

*Q: What else can you do with Apple TV?*

A: Users can access videos from YouTube and photos stored on Flickr or Apple's MobileMe service. Via Apple's iTunes, they can access

podcasts or listen to Internet radio stations. They can also listen to music and view pictures stored on their computers.

*Q: So how does it stack up?*

A: I don't know for sure yet. But the new [Apple](#) TV shares some of the limitations that bothered me about its predecessor -- it offers access to a very small portion of Internet content and doesn't allow users to add new services or applications.

But those limitations are a lot easier to swallow when the device costs less than \$100 rather than more than \$200. And the AirPlay feature alone could put [Apple TV](#) ahead of rivals, such as Roku's digital player.

I'm eager to test it out to be sure.

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