

# Review: A better Apple TV doesn't beat competition

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The logo for the new Apple TV converter is shown, Wednesday, Oct. 6, 2010 in New York. The device grabs movies and TV show rentals from the Internet and displays them on a TV. It does much the same thing as the older Apple TV, but is smaller and costs much less, at \$99. (AP Photo/Mark Lennihan)

(AP) -- Apple is a pioneer in many fields, but in the race to connect our TV sets to the Internet, it's been lagging badly.

Three years ago, the company put out a small box called the [Apple TV](#) that brought [iTunes](#) movies to the [TV set](#), but it was too cumbersome and expensive to be a success. Now, there's a new, revamped and cheaper [Apple TV](#), costing \$99. It mainly represents Apple Inc. catching up to what competitors have been doing in the intervening years. However, with Apple being Apple, it also has some nifty features that set it apart.

So what is the Apple TV? Every time I write about it, I feel compelled to point out that despite the name, it's not a TV set. It's a black box that comes with a small remote. You connect it to your TV set either directly or through a receiver. It shows a computer-like interface on the TV screen, which you navigate using the remote's buttons.

To connect the Apple TV to the Internet, you enter the password for your Wi-Fi hotspot, or connect the box to your router with an [Ethernet cable](#). Once online, you can start renting TV shows and movies from Apple. You can also watch Internet movies from [Netflix](#), if you have an account.

In setup and operation, the new Apple TV is simpler than the old, which was more like a small computer, with a hard drive of its own. It was designed to download shows from iTunes or your computer, then play them back. By contrast, the new one has no hard drive, which makes it smaller and cheaper, and it is designed to play video as it "streams" from the Internet rather than storing them. That means you don't have to worry about the hard drive filling up, either.

So far, so good. But my main problem with the Apple TV business model is still very much a problem. When you rent a movie - usually for \$4.99 if it's in [high definition](#) - and hit the "Play" button, you have 24 hours to watch it. If you can't finish it in one evening, you're going to have to cough up another \$4.99 to finish it. Watching a movie in one sitting is a distant memory from my pre-parenthood days, so this model simply doesn't work for me, and I'm sure I'm not alone.

There's nothing about the Apple TV itself that dictates a 24-hour movie lifespan. It's all Hollywood's fault. The only progress on this issue in the last three years is that we now have 48 hours to watch rented TV shows. So we have twice as long to watch shows that are a quarter of the length of full movies. Thank you, thank you, dear studios.

The Apple TV, does, however, offer a cheaper way to watch movies. If you pay at least \$9 per month for a Netflix subscription, you can watch as much as you want of Netflix Inc.'s streaming movies through the Apple TV. The image quality isn't quite as good as the rentals, the movies aren't as fresh and there's no surround sound, but this is good value for money.

Streaming Netflix movies on the TV is old hat, though. Two years ago, a small company called Roku brought out a small box very reminiscent of today's Apple TV. It cost just \$100 and did a good job. Since then, Netflix service has been extended to game consoles and DVD players. Some TV sets can even play Netflix movies by themselves, with no accessories of any kind.

I took a look at the Roku HD, an updated model of the original box. It costs \$70 and plays Netflix just as well as the Apple TV, though it's a bit bigger and the interface is not as polished. For \$100, you can get version that can connect to older TV sets that don't take digital inputs; Apple TV can't do that.

The Roku boxes don't play Apple or iTunes content, but can play rented and purchased movies and TV shows from Amazon.com Inc., under similar terms. It also offers baseball from MLB.tv and streams from less-known providers. In the next few months, it's also adding Hulu Plus, which provides ABC, Fox and NBC shows for \$10 per month.

So why get an Apple TV instead? Well, it does play well with other Apple products. If you have a computer running iTunes at home, the Apple TV can reach into it to play movies and music from your [hard drive](#), including purchases from the iTunes Store that you wouldn't be able to buy and store with just the Apple TV. Instead of the tiny and eminently losable remote, you can control the Apple TV from the touch screen of an iPhone, iPod touch or iPad.

Apple promises an even cooler feature in November, called AirPlay. A software update will let Apple's handheld gadgets stream photos, audio and video to the TV through the Apple TV, using Wi-Fi. That will be an easy way to get movies and photos you've shot yourself on to the big screen.

Like the Roku boxes, the Apple TV has the potential to save a lot of money for people who like watching movies and a few TV shows, but don't care much about news or sports and can put up with the 24-hour limit on rentals. If you're in that category, you can get rid of cable or satellite service in favor of a TV antenna and a Netflix subscription. Forget "100 channels and nothing on" - you'll have 15 channels and something always on, online.

It's a fine stop-gap solution for the problem of bridging the distance between the TV and the Internet. In the longer term, standalone boxes like this will go away, and TVs will come with Internet connections as standard. It will be interesting to see if Apple has a place in that future.

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