

Apple TV improves, but ideal set-top box still just a dream

October 15 2010, By Troy Wolverton

The promise of Internet-connected set-top boxes is to deliver to your TV set the digital content you can find on your computer without all the complexity and frustration of a PC.

But no box has lived up to this promise. Many are easy to use. But none provides access to more than a fraction of the [digital content](#) available on the Internet.

Apple's latest bid for dominance in living room entertainment -- the updated [Apple](#) TV it released recently -- can now stream Netflix videos and is much smaller and less expensive than before. But it still doesn't do all that consumers will want. And in some ways, it doesn't measure up to its competition.

As they could with its predecessor, Apple TV owners can use it to rent and watch movies and [television](#) shows from Apple's iTunes store. They can view videos from YouTube, see pictures stored on Flickr and listen to radio stations that are streamed over the Internet. They also can connect Apple TV to their PC to view photos, listen to songs or watch videos stored there.

To get the device up and running, many consumers will need to plug in just two cords: the power plug and the HDMI cable connecting it to the TV. The box connects to the Internet either with its built-in Wi-Fi antenna or an Ethernet cable.

Once online, you can instantly pull up videos, music or photos from the Internet using an included remote control. Accessing content from a PC is a little more complicated; you have to launch the latest version of iTunes on your computer and sign in to its "Home Sharing" feature with your iTunes account ID. Once you've done that, Apple TV will be able to see your music and movies and whatever photos you've decided to share with it (through another menu option).

New to this version of Apple TV is a Netflix app that allows subscribers of the video service to stream movies and television shows to their Apple TV. Next month, Apple plans to add another new feature that will allow [iPhone](#), iPod touch and [iPad](#) users to send videos or songs to Apple TV to be enjoyed on their big screen.

The updated device has other advantages over its predecessor. It's about one-fourth the size, only a little bigger than a deck of cards, and costs just \$99, which is \$130 less than Apple charged for its predecessor. And it's whisper-quiet and extraordinarily power-efficient because it doesn't have a hard drive. According to Apple, the new Apple TV burns just two watts of power when in use and less than one watt when in standby mode.

The big shortcoming of the old Apple TV was the paucity of Internet content you could access through it. Unfortunately, the new Apple TV does little to directly address that problem. While Netflix is a welcome addition to the box, much Internet content -- including some available on rival boxes -- still can't be accessed through it.

With Roku's similarly priced line of digital video players, you can watch Major League Baseball games and tune into Pandora Internet radio. Soon you'll also be able to watch videos from Hulu on Roku's box, as you already can on Sony's PlayStation 3. With an Xbox 360, you can log into Facebook and Twitter. With many Internet-connected televisions,

you can get weather reports, stock quotes and sports scores instantly via little on-screen applications called widgets. Right now, you can't get any of those things on Apple TV.

Apple could fix all of that if it allowed users to install applications on Apple TV, as they can with the iPhone and iPad. But in the name of "simplicity," it's decided not to go down that road.

Instead, the company will soon offer something that might be thought of as Apps Light. Thanks to an update coming next month called AirPlay, the iPhone and like devices will be able to send content to Apple TV. That can include not only music, photos or movies stored on those devices, but also content streamed to them over the Internet. So, soon, if you have Hulu running on your iPad, you will be able to project the video to Apple TV.

But you obviously will need to have an extra Apple device -- an iPod touch, iPhone or iPad -- to get this content on your TV. And it will be up to the software developers to add the AirPlay feature to their apps. If they don't, you won't be able to access their content on Apple TV.

Even then, AirPlay can be used only for videos, photos and music; you won't be able to project your iPhone's stock app or the Web page you just viewed onto your TV -- much less the cool new iPhone game you've been playing.

The other big shortcoming of Apple TV, one that will become even more apparent if Apple adds more services to it, is that there's no easy way to search for content on it. Unlike TiVo's latest DVRs, Apple TV doesn't have a universal search feature.

To find a particular television show, you have to individually search [iTunes](#), Netflix or YouTube. Apple TV doesn't allow you to search

across them.

That's too bad, because none of the three video services on [Apple TV](#) offers anything close to a comprehensive list of Hollywood content. It would be nice to be able to find what you are looking for in one place, no matter what service it's in.

To be sure, Apple TV's new \$99 price tag makes its failings a lot easier to forgive. And the AirPlay feature promises to soon make it a lot more useful. But it's still not as good as it could -- or should -- be.

THE NEW APPLE TV:

- Troy's rating: 3.5 out of 5
- Likes: Tiny -- less than 4 inches square and less than 1 inch thick. Inexpensive. Power-efficient. Easy setup and use. Streams [Netflix](#). Coming AirPlay feature will add more content from iOS devices.
- Dislikes: Very limited access to Internet content via device itself. No universal search. No ability to add new apps or features.
- How much: \$99
- Web: www.apple.com

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