

Review: New Roku, TV Play streaming video players a hit and a miss

March 21 2013, by Troy Wolverton

For watching Internet video on your TV, I'm a big fan of streaming video players. These typically are inexpensive, hockey-puck sized boxes that plug into your TV and offer access to dozens of Internet channels and sometimes allow you to watch videos streamed from your computer or smartphone.

In recent weeks, two new [streaming video](#) players hit the market, one from Roku and another from Western Digital. I like the former, but am not so hot about the latter.

Roku's newest box is the Roku 3, which replaces the Roku 2 XS at the top end of its product line. For the same \$100 price, it represents a nice upgrade.

The biggest difference between the two generations is a seemingly minor one: The remote control that ships with the Roku 3 includes a headphone port and [headphones](#), which let you watch TV without the sound track disturbing those who don't want to hear it.

It's a cool upgrade, and one that users with small houses or [young kids](#) will appreciate. I often find myself wanting to watch TV right after my kids have gone to bed, but worrying I'll disturb them by turning it on. With the Roku 3, that's no longer a concern.

The only other big difference between the two generations is that the Roku 3 has a dual-core processor that helps make it speedier and load

apps more quickly.

The Roku 3 also ships with a newly designed interface that the company will roll out to older boxes next month. It arrays users' channels across three columns instead of arranging them all on a single horizontal line, making it easier to scroll through channels. To the left of the channel list, users will find a new navigation area that includes a link to Roku's universal search. That feature allows users to search across some of the device's top channels, including Netflix, [Hulu](#) and Amazon, for particular movies, actors and directors. It's a great feature that now is more prominent and quicker to find and use.

Although they aren't new, there are other things to like about the Roku 3. It offers the broadest selection of Internet channels around: about 750 at last count. It still lacks YouTube, which is available on most other digital set-top boxes, and iTunes, which is only available on Apple TV, but those are about the only notable absences you'll find among streaming video and audio services.

And users can play games on the Roku 3, including some by using its motion sensing remote control. The selection is fairly limited, but it does include "Angry Birds Space" and "Jeopardy."

If you've already got a Roku 2 box, there's no need to throw it out for a Roku 3. But if you are in the market for a streaming video device, the Roku 3 is one of the best around.

I wasn't as impressed with Western Digital's newest digital player, the WD TV Play.

Western Digital has tried to carve out a spot for itself in the digital living room with devices that are supposed to help users enjoy their personal content on their big-screen TVs. Last year, the company introduced the

WD TV Live, which added the ability to stream video from a collection of Internet channels.

Its \$70 Play, introduced last month, is even more focused on streaming video, with an interface built around video and audio apps.

The Play includes a decent range of the most popular Internet content services, including [Netflix](#), Hulu and YouTube. And it includes a cool feature borrowed from some smartphones and tablets: Some of its apps will display updated information without requiring you to actually launch them. So, for example, the icon for the AccuWeather app displays the current temperature, and the Tweet app displays the latest Twitter posts from people you follow.

But compared with Roku's devices or Apple TV, the Play comes up short in numerous ways. It only offers 33 channels and is missing lots of notable ones. It has no channels for professional sports programming and no Amazon app. And you're stuck with whatever channels are preinstalled; Western Digital doesn't have an app or channel store.

I found that streaming content from your PC or network to the Play was more difficult than on the Roku 3, forcing you to navigate an ugly folder-based interface to find the content you want.

The Play also lacks a universal search feature, and its smartphone app is disappointing. You can't use it to beam pictures or music to your TV, and with some Play channels, you can't use the smartphone's virtual keyboard to type user names and passwords, forcing you to hunt and peck with the remote.

So I'd pass on the Play. For watching Internet video, you have much better choices, starting with the Roku 3.

ROKU 3 STREAMING MEDIA PLAYER:

-Likes: Inexpensive; offers access to hundreds of Internet channels; new headphone port on remote control allows users to watch movies without disturbing family members; faster than previous models; new interface easier to use.

-Dislikes: Lacks YouTube channel or ability to play protected iTunes content; game offerings paltry.

-Price: \$100

-Web: roku.com

WESTERN DIGITAL WD TV PLAY:

-Likes: Inexpensive; offers access to many top Internet channels; new, streamlined interface; "live" app icons show updated information.

-Dislikes: No app store; relatively few Internet channels included; lacks professional sports content and an Amazon channel; [smartphone](#) app can't beam music or pictures to TV; clunky interface for streaming video from PC.

-Price: \$70

-Web: wdc.com

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