

Review: Amazon Kindle Fire TV understands and obeys

May 22 2014, by Jim Rossman



Most people are familiar with TV boxes like Apple TV, Roku or Google Chromecast that connect your TV to the Internet to facilitate video streaming. Amazon was late to enter the streaming market - Apple and Roku are on their third-generation boxes - but the new Kindle Fire TV (\$99, amazon.com) is a worthy competitor with a lot of great features.

The Kindle Fire TV is a black box about the size of a drink coaster, measuring 4.5 inches by 4.5 inches by 0.7 inches.

The back of the box is pretty simple. It has an HDMI output, optical audio output, Ethernet port and USB port.

You connect the box to your TV with HDMI and connect the Fire TV to the Internet using Ethernet or Wi-Fi.

Fire TV runs a Qualcomm 1.7 GHz quad-core processor with 2 gigabytes of RAM and 8 gigabytes of internal storage. The graphics processor is a Qualcomm Adreno 320. Internal radios include Bluetooth 4.0 and Wi-Fi 802.11a/b/g/n.

I'm not an audiophile, but if you are, the Fire TV can support Dolby Digital Plus, 5.1 surround sound, 2ch Stereo and HDMI audio pass-through up to 7.1.

Since this is an Amazon box, the content is skewed toward the Amazon video ecosystem. Videos are available for purchase or rent from Amazon, and if you're an Amazon Prime subscriber, the Prime streaming video catalog is there as well.

Since Amazon makes the box and serves up the videos, the Fire TV comes with your Amazon ID already configured.

Your Amazon content that's stored in the cloud will be visible as soon as you power it up.

Aside from Amazon Instant Video and Prime Instant Video content, the Fire TV offers Netflix, Hulu Plus, Watch ESPN, Crackle, YouTube and more.

There are also music offerings including Pandora, Tunein Radio and iHeart Radio. Your Amazon MP3 library will be streamable starting this month.

HBO CATALOG

Amazon recently announced a deal to bring older seasons of HBO original programming like "The Wire," "Six Feet Under" and "The Sopranos" to the Fire TV. The HBO back catalog (seasons that aired at least three years ago) will be available May 21.

This deal is the first time HBO has licensed its content to customers who don't subscribe to HBO from their TV providers.

HBO Go and its library of current original programming will be available to HBO subscribers on Fire TV by year's end.

The Fire TV does not support local file playback, meaning you can't just plug a hard drive into the USB port and play your movies.

The Fire TV does support Plex, which is a way to serve up and watch your personal videos using a Plex server, running on a computer on your network, to stream your videos to the Fire TV.

You can also upload your videos to the Amazon Cloud and play them back on the Fire TV.

The Amazon Cloud can stream your saved photos and slide shows to your TV through the box.

The remote control works using Bluetooth, which means the Fire TV can be hidden away in your TV cabinet and controlled with no line of sight.

The remote is simple and has a good button design.

It has a microphone, and Fire TV does a great job with voice command for content searching.

Voice search never failed to figure out what I was saying, and the searches all returned viable results with almost no lag. You can search for movie or TV show titles, actors, directors and genres.

The Kindle Fire TV also aims to satisfy your gaming habit with an optional game controller (\$40) and more than 100 games available (more coming) from game makers such as EA, Disney and Ubisoft. Some games are free, others cost money.

Amazon has a new service for the Fire TV called FreeTime that enables a parent to set up profiles for up to four children. The profiles are used to set limits on the titles they watch and even time limits on their daily viewing.

FULL-FEATURED

Owners of Amazon's Kindle Fire HDX tablets will be able to mirror their screens to the TV. There's a "second screen" feature so you can be watching a movie on TV and see related content on your Amazon tablet.

Like the Roku, the Fire TV has an app store with video content, music apps and games available for free or a small fee.

As you can see, the Kindle Fire TV is a full-featured device. Amazon took its time with the development, and it shows. The Fire TV is very responsive. Menus load quickly, and playback is rock solid.

I suppose the choice is all about which ecosystem you choose.

People who use iTunes and own Macs or iOS devices will gravitate to the Apple TV.

Users of Google's Play store will likely check out a Chromecast.

The Roku has tons of channels, although many of them are obscure.

If you're a Kindle tablet owner or you keep your MP3s in Amazon's cloud server, the Fire TV is going to have great appeal.

If you're not married to any of those services, Fire TV has the content and the hardware specs to warrant your attention.

Pros: Fast, tons of content choices

Cons: USB port isn't for local files.

Bottom line: If you're an Amazon customer, especially a Prime subscriber, the Fire TV should be your choice.

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