

In Tech: Comcast games, Microsoft music, HBO online

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Comcast is adding another hook to try to keep customers in front of the TV: video games in its set-top boxes.

The country's largest cable TV provider is working with video game maker Electronic Arts. For now, the service is free for people who pay for both Comcast TV and Internet. Customers may have to pay once a test phase ends after at least a few weeks.

Games available include FIFA Soccer, NBA Jam and Monopoly.

Comcast says the service is aimed at casual players, including people who play on phones, rather than hard-core gamers who already use consoles such as Xbox or PlayStation. The games through Comcast don't let you play online with friends or strangers, as many games allow on consoles today. You can play by yourself or with people sitting in the room with you, using smartphones or tablets as controllers.

Comcast wants to position its set-top box, the X1, as an entertainment hub. The box can stream music from Pandora and display photos from Facebook, Instagram and Flickr on a TV. Only about 5 million of Comcast's 22.4 million video customers have X1, but the company says it expects most customers will get it by the end of 2016. Customers who don't have the X1 box yet can request it.

You can sign up for the games at www.xfinity.com/xfinitygames.

— Tali Arbel, AP Technology Writer

Microsoft has a streaming music service, too—though it was mostly overlooked as attention turned to Apple's entry into a business crowded

with Spotify, Google Play and others.

Maybe that's why Microsoft is revamping the service formerly known as Xbox Music. It's now called Groove.

Along with the new name, Microsoft promises redesigned menus and other new features when it releases Groove with Microsoft's new Windows 10 operating system later this month.

The company said it's dropping the Xbox name to avoid confusion, as the service is no longer focused on Xbox gaming consoles. Instead, the new Groove can be used to manage music files on any PC or mobile device running Windows 10.

Like the Xbox Music service, Groove will also offer unlimited streaming from Microsoft's music catalog for \$10 a month. It will work on Android and Apple mobile devices as well as Mac and Windows PCs.

As with Apple and Google, Microsoft also offers the option to upload songs you own to the Internet, through Microsoft's OneDrive storage service, for playback on other devices.

Meanwhile, Apple says it's honing its Apple Music service as more people weigh in with suggestions and complaints. The company plans to restore "Home Sharing," or the ability to stream music from a computer running iTunes to other Apple devices over Wi-Fi. Home Sharing was disabled on iPhones and iPads with the iOS 8.4 software update that enables Apple Music.

— Brandon Bailey, AP Technology Writer

HBO's stand-alone Internet service, HBO Now, is available on Android and Amazon devices starting Thursday.

The online video service had been limited to Apple device owners and customers of the New York-area cable company Cablevision. Google announced plans for Android earlier, but hadn't disclosed a launch date.

If you download the HBO Now app on an Android tablet or phone or on an Amazon Fire tablet, you get a 30-day free trial. Afterward, it costs \$15 a month.

Amazon says it'll be available on Amazon Fire TV and Fire TV Stick in the coming weeks, while HBO says it'll work with Google's Chromecast and Android TV soon. HBO Now is already available on the iPhone, iPad and Apple TV.

Once downloaded, you can watch on any device that works with HBO Now, be it a phone, tablet, TV or a computer.

HBO Now gives access to the premium channel's original series like "Game of Thrones" and "Girls" as well as Hollywood movies to the growing number of people who pay for Internet service but not cable TV. That's an estimated 11.7 million customers, according to data provider SNL Kagan.

— Tali Arbel, AP Technology Writer

People no longer have to pay multiple times to use Sling Media's services for watching their television channels and recorded shows while traveling.

The company's Slingbox device sends video from the living room to various phones, tablets and other devices. It's like watching whatever is on your home TV wherever you are around the world.

Although remote viewing is free on personal computers, a \$15 SlingPlayer app is required for other devices. If you had both a phone and a tablet, that's \$30 on top of the cost of the Slingbox.

With Thursday's launch of a new entry-level model, the Slingbox M2, Sling Media is eliminating the app fees. But the device itself costs \$200, compared with \$150 for the M1 last summer.

Besides free apps, the M2 also comes with free setup assistance. The hardware isn't changing.

The high-end Slingbox 500 model remains at \$300 and comes with free apps, too.

You still need an antenna or TV subscription, along with a digital video recorder to record shows.

— Anick Jesdanun, AP Technology Writer

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