

Review: Google's Chromecast is tops for inexpensive streaming

October 27 2015, by Troy Wolverton, San Jose Mercury News



When it debuted two years ago, Google's Chromecast shook up the market for digital streaming devices. The company is hoping now to build on that success, releasing a new and improved version of the

Chromecast.

The new model isn't a whole lot different from its predecessor, but I'm impressed with how good a [device](#) it has become.

The original Chromecast stood apart from the competition when it launched. At \$35, it was much less expensive than its rivals, most of which cost at least twice as much. Unlike those devices, it was the size of a USB stick and could be hidden from view by plugging directly into a television.

It also worked differently from those devices. It didn't come with a [remote control](#) and didn't offer any kind of on-screen interface. Instead, users controlled and interacted with it through their phones. If they wanted to watch or listen to something, they beamed it to the Chromecast from their handheld device.

When it launched, the device seemed to be more of a work-in-progress rather than a finished product. It only worked with a handful of apps, and it could be hard to find ones that were compatible with it. There was no way to beam pictures or movies stored on users' phones to their televisions. And video streamed to it could be choppy, in part because it could only connect to Wi-Fi networks over the 2.4 GHz band, which is generally overcrowded.

By now, though, Google and its legion of software developers have addressed many of these problems. The company says there are now thousands of Chromecast-compatible apps, many of which are available for both Android devices and for Apple's iOS, which underlies the iPhone and iPad.

Among them are many of the most popular [streaming media](#) services, including Netflix, Spotify, HBO Now, Showtime Anytime and Hulu.

Additionally, you'll find apps that will let you beam drawings, pictures and presentations to your screen. You'll even find a selection of games that you can play on your television, via Chromecast, using your phone as a controller.

If you have an Android device, you can even beam apps to your screen that don't have built-in compatibility with Chromecast. Google has developed a technology similar to Apple's AirPlay that allows Chromecast to mirror what's on their phones screens on their televisions.

Although the new Chromecast still doesn't come with a remote control, Google does have a Chromecast app for both Android and iOS devices that makes it easier to control and use the device.

Owners use the app for the initial configuration of a Chromecast. But they can also use it to find other apps that are compatible with the device, both ones they've already installed and ones that they can download from a special section of Google's Play store. The device also has a search feature that allows users to search for movies or television shows across several Chromecast compatible apps.

With the updated hardware, which still costs just \$35, Google has also addressed the original device's connection problems. The new device, which looks like a small disk with a flat USB cable coming out of it, supports the latest Wi-Fi standards. It has multiple Wi-Fi antennas that can help signals get around obstacles in a room and it supports the less crowded 5 GHz Wi-Fi band.

The device isn't perfect, of course. Unlike the latest - and much more expensive - streaming media boxes from Roku, Amazon and Nvidia, the new Chromecast doesn't support 4K, the new standard for ultra-high resolution video that's becoming more common among the latest televisions. And you're unlikely to be able to play high-end games on the

Chromecast that you can already find on Nvidia's Shield and that are in development for the new Apple TV.

The Chromecast also works better with Android devices than with iPhones or iPads, because the default apps in iOS don't work with the device. That means that you can't beam to Chromecast songs from Apple Music; videos you've purchased from iTunes; Web pages or videos you've pulled up in Safari or pictures and videos from the Photos app. In some cases, you can work around these limitations, but the apps that allow you to do so aren't always easy to use.

Meanwhile, the lack of a remote control can be annoying. If you need to pause a movie because the phone's ringing, it's a lot easier to push a button on a physical remote than to find the media controls on your phone after you've unlocked it first.

Still, the new Chromecast is a much more complete and satisfying device to use than its predecessor was at launch. And when its latest rivals cost more than \$100, it's still a heck of a deal.

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What: Google Chromecast streaming media player

Likes: Inexpensive; compatible with thousands of apps, including many of the most popular ones; works with both Apple devices and Android-based ones; new Wi-Fi radios address streaming problems; updated app makes it easier to find compatible services and content.

Dislikes: Works better with Android devices than Apple ones; lacks support for 4K; lacks a physical remote control.

Price: \$35

Web: google.com/chromecast

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