

Mac and Media, AppleTV (or not?)

Traditionally, May is the month we at Passages take a look at the state of music on the Mac. Well, the thing most obvious to me is it's not about just music anymore. Nowadays, people are getting into a lot more than merely music. There's video where thousands are making them and posting them on YouTube. They're watched millions of times. With their Macs, they're able to edit their creations not just by cutting and pasting bits of videos together, but making soundtracks, voiceovers, cuts, dubs and, well, almost all of the things done by the pros in multi-million dollar studios...most of it done with the tools that come with their Macs out of the box. Another revolution in consumer-oriented listening is Podcasting. Now, with GarageBand and some low-cost shareware applications, anyone can produce their own show, complete with guests from anywhere in the world, and put it on the Web where anyone who wants to, can listen when they want, as often as they like, in any order they please. It's rather amazing really.

Last month Apple introduced another facet to your digital entertainment, introducing the AppleTV. This is a device that allows you to bring all of your music, photos and iTunes-purchased video content seamlessly to your HDTV (and to some non-HD TVs as well) from a Mac or a PC. It represents Apple's desire to run your living room entertainment entirely.

The screenshot shows the Apple TV website interface. On the left, under 'Mac + PC', it says 'Your computer is the center of your digital life. Your TV is the center of your entertainment life. But what if you want to watch movies, TV shows, movie trailers, podcasts, and photos from your computer on your TV? At \$299, Apple TV brings iTunes to the big screen.' Below this, it says 'The revolution will be televised. Say you've just downloaded Cars from iTunes. Instead of huddling around your computer to watch, you pop some popcorn while your computer wirelessly syncs your new flick to Apple TV. Then you pull up a seat, put up your feet, and pick up the included Apple Remote to play your movie on TV. Give yourself a hand: You've just changed the way you watch digital media.' Under 'How it works', there are three numbered steps: 1) 'Download movies, TV shows and more from iTunes.' with an image of a computer screen; 2) 'Sync wirelessly from your Mac or PC.' with an image of the Apple TV device; 3) 'Watch everything on your widescreen TV.' with an image of a television displaying a movie trailer. On the right, under 'iTunes to Apple TV, wire free.', it says 'Apple TV connects to your TV via an HDMI port or component video and audio ports. Its built-in, superfast 802.11 wireless capability syncs your iTunes library from any Mac or PC in the house. Best of all, what's on Apple TV stays in sync. Anytime you change your library in iTunes, it changes on Apple TV — wirelessly, automatically.' Below this, it says 'What's on TV? Whatever you want. Apple TV puts your iTunes library — movies, TV shows, music, and podcasts — plus movie trailers from Apple.com on your TV. And your digital photos from iPhoto on a Mac or Adobe Photoshop Elements or Adobe Album on a Windows PC appear in high definition, so you can put on a stunning big-screen slideshow.'

Apple TV

I think the real intention of the AppleTV is to sell you more content off of the iTunes Store. Without literally getting into your new appliance, you can only view content that you've purchased through iTunes along with streaming movie trailers from iTunes as well. From all I've heard, the iTunes purchased material pertains only to the video, not the audio; all of your audio content can be played through AppleTV. The home web page for AppleTV has a "how



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it works" section that gives you the one...two...three of operating it; 1) "Download movies, TV shows and more from iTunes." I rest my case. The website also offers recommendations of various brands of televisions to check out if you're (like me) not in the HDTV camp yet.

The graphic is titled 'Compatible TVs' and lists various manufacturers whose televisions are compatible with Apple TV. The manufacturers listed are: HP, Mitsubishi Electric, Pioneer, Sharp, Hitachi, NEC, Polaroid, Toshiba, JVC, Olevia, Samsung, Vizio, Panasonic, Philips, Sony, and Westinghouse. The text also states: 'Apple TV works with widescreen, enhanced-definition or high-definition TVs capable of 1080i, 720p, 576p, or 480p resolutions, including popular models from these manufacturers.'

Televisions compatible with Apple TV

You can transfer a lot of content directly over to the AppleTV's 40GB hard drive either wirelessly or over an Ethernet connection from one of your computers. You can also stream content over to it from several other computers and, from what I've read and heard, it seems to be the preferred method to use. The unit supports 802.11b, 802.11g and 802.11n wireless networks, with streaming achieved using 802.11g or the newest 802.11n. 802.11n networks sport a faster stream over a much wider area so, theoretically, one of the new Airport Extremes should cover your whole house for connectivity IF all of your network devices also support the new spec.

Although AppleTV can probably make your media entertainment life easier, there are other alternatives for those of us that have not made the plunge into HDTV for whatever reason. For myself there's budget considerations and the fact that I've never seen the 'official' FCC specifications for transmitting HD signals which should provide manufacturers of HDTVs the definitive specs for receiving those signals and displaying them, until very recently.

It turns out that I had never dug deep enough and I found that a standard was adopted...way back in December of 1996. From www.fcc.gov, I found the document, DC-96-117, "FCC ADOPTS DTV STANDARD". It says, "The Federal Communications Commission today adopted a standard for digital television (DTV). The standard is a modification of the Advanced Television System Committee's (ATSC) DTV Standard first proposed for adoption earlier this year. The standard adopted today is consistent with a consensus agreement voluntarily developed by a broad cross-section of parties, including the broadcasting, equipment manufacturing and computer industries. The standard allows transmission of one or two High Definition Television programs; four, five or more Standard

Definition Television programs at a visual quality better than the current analog signal; many CD-quality audio signals; and the delivery of large amounts of data. The standard does not include requirements with respect to scanning formats, aspect ratios and lines of resolution."

Okay so there's a standard. The problem comes with the last sentence "...does not include requirements with respect to scanning formats, aspect ratios and lines of resolution." Looking deeper, I found a document published by the ATSC titled "Amendment to ATSC Digital Television Standard, Doc. A/53D, to define Video System Characteristics of VC-1 as new Annex F". In it, there are specifications ranging from 120 X 176 progressive through 1080 X 1920 progressive. Why the FCC does not include these requirements is puzzling to me. In addition, on April 25th, the FCC adopted new DTV transition rule. TelevisionBroadcast.com reported the following, "The FCC has adopted an order that requires retailers to keep consumers fully informed about TV sets being sold with only analog tuners. The action is part of an effort to keep consumers aware of the upcoming digital TV transition.

Although the FCC's DTV tuner rule prohibits the manufacture, import or interstate shipment of devices containing analog tuners without the inclusion of digital tuners, existing inventories of such devices may continue to be sold. The problem is that consumers may not be aware that such equipment will not be able to receive over-the-air signals after February 17, 2009.

The order adopts a rule requiring sellers to include the following text if they are selling analog-only TV equipment:

Consumer Alert

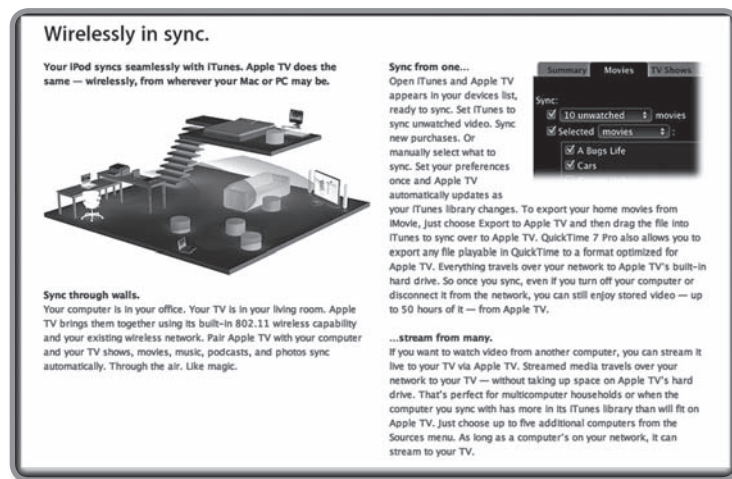
This television receiver has only an analog broadcast tuner and will require a converter box after February 17, 2009, to receive over-the-air broadcasts with an antenna because of the Nation's transition to digital broadcasting. Analog-only TVs should continue to work as before with cable and satellite TV services, gaming consoles, VCRs, DVD players, and similar products. For more information, call the Federal Communications Commission at 1-888-225-5322 (TTY: 1-888-835-5322) or visit the Commission's digital television website at: www.dtv.gov."

So, we get an alert about standard TVs needing a converter box in less than two years, but they've yet to adopt a standard that would specify just how a new HDTV be configured to translate the transmissions it receives. Hmm...I have to wonder if there's some considerable amount of "What's in it for me?" in this equation.

Okay, enough ranting. Where does this *minor*(?!?) conundrum leave people like me? Well, here's how I've gotten around trading up to a HiDef TV that could be obsolete before the HD format is the only way to go.

My old JVC unit does not have anything but coax and standard TV antenna connections. So I have the incoming cable going to my VCR and then to the television. My DVD player is attached to the component jacks on the back of the VCR. As far as I'm concerned, the quality of the picture I get from the my DVDs is as good as it can be on this type of TV and I really don't have

anything to complain about. The biggest lack of my TV is the skimpy monaural speaker it has. It's not terrible, but it certainly lacks any of the punch DVDs are capable of providing. Now there's also all content I've gotten from iTunes and all the music ripped from hundreds of CDs.



Apple TV linking wirelessly with your computer

The one thing I wanted was to be able to sit back and watch it from the TV. I came up with this easy solution. Last year, we purchased an iPod HiFi to take with on our Florida vacation. It turned out to be a very good purchase. It has great sound and a very surprising, high quality soundstage. Sounds are not just in front of you, but dispersed into the listening area much like you'd expect from a quality home stereo. I loaded my iPod with some of the TV shows I got from iTunes (Heroes, in particular) and mounted it on the HiFi. Plugging an iPod AV cable into the iPod, I attached only the video output to the front panel component video jack on the VCR. I switched the VCR channel to that input and there it was. All of the image content on my TV, with a very pleasing sound coming from the HiFi. I am not disappointed at all with the result! Okay, it's not the easiest way to get your content over to the television, but it works without much inconvenience. And, with the older set I have, it was the only option I could devise. I'm sure you can accomplish close to the same result with any good quality iPod speaker system.

To summarize, there's the old TV with a cable connector, a VCR with component video inputs in front and back, a DVD player with component video outputs, an iPod, an iPod AV cable and a suitable iPod docking speaker system. Call it the "poor-man's AppleTV."

Does it stack up to an HDTV hooked up to an AppleTV? Of course not! Also, I wonder what the signal that looks just fine on my analog TV, would look like on an HDTV. Then there's the effects of Dolby Surround sound to wonder about as well, but the AppleTV does not support that yet. I suspect that it will in the future. I hope that this'll help all of you that did not upgrade to an HDTV get the most they can from the tools you probably have now. 🍌

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