

Media Made Easy January\February 2006 Newsletter

News and Events:

- ?? Microsoft is doing some interesting software development to give similar functionality as the "Sling box". It offers the promise of watching your recorded TV shows over the Internet from anywhere.

http://www.betanews.com/article/MS_Testing_Media_Center_TV_Streaming/1137177825

- ?? Bill Gates keynote at CES 2006 was pretty cool. Media Center fans will find much of the content very promising. Windows Vista looks like a huge improvement in so many ways. Check it out here if you're interested.

<http://www.microsoft.com/events/executives/billgates.msp>

- ?? We think TiVo has finally lost what was left of it's collective mind. New pricing schemes offer a free box if you'll pay a higher monthly fee. Why would anyone do this unless they really hate the DVR from their cable/satellite provider? The blog buzz is hinting strongly that TiVo may be in big trouble with their shareholders, partners and the press.

<http://www.pvrwire.com/2006/02/27/under-pressure-tivo-may-begin-offering-free-pvrs/>

- ?? Archos has released a new video player the Archos AV500. The acknowledged leader in portable media players has scored another home run!
- ?? It looks like the PlayStation 3 is going to be delayed for nearly a year. Hard to believe that Sony will let XBox go unchallenged that long.

http://news.com.com/PlayStation+3+may+be+delayed+a+year/2100-1043_3-6041327.html?tag=nefd.top

- ?? Dolby has announced a new Dolby HD Audio specification for optical players. The new system offers 7.1 discrete channels of lossless audio. The release promises that this technology will reach into our PCs very soon. If it is true it would then be possible to nearly match the original fidelity of the movie audio track.

<http://investor.dolby.com/ReleaseDetail.cfm?ReleaseID=182983>

- ?? This article ties in nicely with our feature topic on the launch of HD DVD. Yet more confusion reigns with getting all the specifications and players to play nicely together including HDMI and Dolby Digital.

<http://www.guidetohometheater.com/news/020506hdmi/>

- ?? An interesting viewpoint from a die hard MythTV fan. He decided to hold a winner takes all showdown between Media Center and MythTV.

<http://www.notpopular.com/blog/comments.php?blogID=68>

- ?? Ever wondered how to choose an HDTV OTA antenna? HDBeat has a great overview here.

<http://www.hdbeat.com/2006/01/30/ota-hd-demystified/>

?? Anthony Park (and Chris Lanier) have developed a web browser for use within Media Center - so you don't have to leave to surf.

<http://www.anpark.com/software.aspx>

November's Feature Topic - High Definition DVD

This month the new High Definition DVD titles and players are hitting the market. We figured this was a great time to bring everyone up to speed so you can decide whether it makes sense to jump in on the bleeding edge or wait until things shake out.

The Background

It has been several years since the DVD format came to market. At the time of launch, the DVD format and hardware represented a giant leap forward from VHS tape formats and hardware. It offered digital storage, longer storage life and higher resolution pictures. We have all enjoyed the benefits of DVDs. The downside was that the format was created before the rapid adoption of high definition television displays. DVD is formatted at 720X480 resolution so it looks great on a standard TV. On a high definition display a DVD movie looks noticeably inferior to a high definition broadcast movie. Another drawback to the format is that the media (disc) only supports around 4.5 GB of storage (around 9 GB for dual layer DVDs), so there is a serious limitation to the amount of high definition video it can hold.

The Issue

The consumer has rapidly adopted high definition televisions and the FCC has mandated high definition broadcasting from the broadcasters. The movie studios want to feed the appetite for high definition movies too. Needless to say the hardware manufacturers want to cash in on high definition player sales as soon as possible.

Sounds like everyone wins right?

Once again there is a fly in the ointment of consumer electronics technology - the dreaded format war!

The Japanese consumer electronics companies decided to have a format war rather than agree on a unified format for high definition DVDs. This has resulted in two competing technologies - Blu-Ray and HD DVD. Both formats use a blue laser (different frequency) rather than a red laser like standard DVDs. The blue laser can burn more bits onto a disc to support the storage demands of high definition video. Unfortunately they use different lasers and discs.

Formats?

Why are formats important and how do they affect us? Remember when digital technology was first touted as the next big thing? We were all promised nifty little discs that would hold everything and play in everything. Our music, computer files, videos, everything! would fit on a disc that could be used in our computers, music players, cars, etc. We wouldn't ever be faced with another 8-track tape or Betamax disaster again right?

Well it didn't exactly work out that way. Instead we have CDs, DVDs, mp3 players and so on. All of these cost money and work with different hardware devices. The manufacturers like this system because they can sell more hardware, players and discs. The content providers are less happy since formats cost them money to produce and if a format fails to win consumer support can lose them a lot of money. This is offset somewhat by the fact they sold us the same song on record, tape, CD or download. The retailers can get stuck with a lot of useless inventory (whatever happened to all those LP records sitting at WalMart?).

For the consumer it is also a two-edged sword. We get better quality content (looking and sounding better all the time) that theoretically will last our lifetimes. On the other hand, we have to keep upgrading the hardware and rebuying the content in many cases. We also get burned in several ways if we are early-adopters. Sometimes the formats fail completely and we have to eat our investment (how many of you purchased a Betamax or a Laser-disc movie player?_). Sometimes the technologies themselves are full of problems and we become lab rats for the hardware and software manufacturers. Worst of all we pay outrageous prices for the equipment and content (remember when a cheap DVD player was \$199 instead of \$30).

Formats really do matter because they represent technological improvement with massive potential downsides to our wallets.

In the case of high definition DVD this is definitely the case. The competing technologies offer improvements but more than likely one or both will become obsolete very quickly. You some decisions to make - Should you go into this technology now or wait until one wins? If you go now, which one should you choose?

HD DVD

HD DVD is a format developed by Toshiba and NEC. It uses the same sized disc as a standard DVD but can fit up to 30GB of video and audio.

The movie studios supporting this format (producing HD DVDs of their movies) are Time Warner (Warner Bros., HBO, New Line Cinema), Universal (Dream Works) and Paramount. Around 60 of the top 100 movies (rated by the American Film Institute) will be produced in this format.

Strengths:

- ?? An easy name to understand. We aren't kidding! Names are important for consumer adoption by non-technical people and this name is easily understood.
- ?? Easily manufactured by studios and disc makers with existing equipment.
- ?? Good support among several top studios.
- ?? Fully supports Mandated Managed Copies - You can make a backup copy and use it in portable players or stream it on your home network for instance.
- ?? Uses iHD specification and language.

Weaknesses:

- ?? Less studio support will mean fewer titles initially.
- ?? Smaller storage capabilities mean that it could become obsolete more quickly if content requirements change.

Blu-Ray

Blu-Ray is a format developed by Sony and supported by Dell, Hewlett Packard, LG Electronics, Matsushita, Philips and Pioneer. It uses a different-sized disc than a standard DVD but can fit up to 50GB of video and audio. Most movies won't exceed 25 GB however.

The movie studios supporting this format (producing HD DVDs of their movies) are Sony (Columbia, Tri-Star), Twentieth Century Fox and Disney. Around 40 of the top 100 movies (rated by the American Film Institute) will be produced in this format. This format has wider support from studios so more new releases should be supported than with HD DVD.

Strengths:

- ?? Has more studios lined up to release titles.
- ?? More storage space available.
- ?? Written in Java so should be easily supported by OEMs.

Weaknesses:

- ?? Name isn't easily understood - will need to explain what a Blu-Ray disc is.
- ?? Requires new equipment to produce new disc size.
- ?? Smaller laser aperture is causing higher failure rates in production (problem may be fixable but is currently a large weakness).
- ?? Uses the European JEM specification which could cause player recognition issues for some hardware manufacturers.
- ?? Fox studios has forced additional copyright protections above AACIS protection - This additional digital rights management scheme could restrict or eliminate Managed Copies. There are rumors that this DRM scheme has delayed the Playstation3 development cycle since a Blu-Ray player will be included.

Hardware

Toshiba's first HD DVD players go on sale any day now and will be priced at \$799 for the home theater model and \$499 for the basic model with less A/V interconnection options. Blu-Ray players should hit the market in May or June with the Pioneer player retailing for \$1,800.

Conclusion

Consumers will eventually be the winner from this competition because one or both of these formats could be dismantled in the marketplace. With any luck the financial ramifications will hurt the losing format supporters so badly that we won't see a format war for quite some time. There really shouldn't have been a war in this case since both formats are so very close to offering the same thing - the studios and hardware manufacturers deserve to feel some pain for encouraging the conflict.

So should you wait to see which one wins? Our answer is yes, absolutely!

If money is no object then jump in and make your bet on which one will win. Which one should you buy?

Like choosing Xbox360 (available now) or waiting for Playstation3, it is a tough call.

We're going to recommend Blu-Ray. Not because it is better (We in fact think HD DVD made all the right calls on specifications and feature support whereas Blu-Ray blew it and then compounded their problems by messing with additional DRM) but because it can offer more content more quickly. We take our position based upon past history. Betamax was first to market - a Sony product :) for those counting - but was trounced because VHS could offer more movie titles more quickly. We believe that all things being equal "content is king"...we'll be rooting for HD DVD because they actually tried to go with consensus specifications and keep a format war from ever happening. That's our opinion and we could be wrong.

Tip for February

For those of you who installed the Media Center Rollup 2 and we're having problems with content restriction and blue screens with HBO, we recommend the following fix. We have tested this on our machines and it worked (the hotfixes and reinstallation never worked on our machines but feel free to try them). Please create a system restore point before making any of the changes recommended here.

1. Attempt to backup your licenses in Windows Media Player (didn't work for us but it's worth a try for you)
 - a. Open WMP
 - b. On the Tools menu click on Manage Licenses
 - c. Click Back Up Now. Close WMP.
2. Click on Start and select Run. Type "net stop ehRecvr" without the quotes
3. Click OK to run it. You will see a black box popup saying that the media service has been stopped.
4. Click on Start and select My Computer.
5. From the Tools menu select Folder Options.
6. From the Folders Options window select the View tab.
7. From the View tab, click on the checkbox to "Show hidden files and folders"
8. Click on the checkbox next to "Hide protected operating systems files (Recommended)" to uncheck this setting. When prompted with the warning click on Yes.
9. Click on the Apply button and then click the OK button.
10. From the My Computer window double click on the C: Drive icon (or whatever your operating system drive letter is). Next click on Documents and Settings. Next click on All Users. You should now see a folder labeled "DRM". Right click on this folder and select delete. You want to delete the entire folder. The folder will be recreated automatically when you run Media Center again.
11. After deleting the folder you should go back into the Folder Options, View tab and check on the box to select "Hide protected operating system files" so you don't mistakenly delete anything else.
12. You can now restore your licenses if the backup in step 1 worked. Otherwise, we recommend that you restart your computer, create another restore point and then enjoy HBO in Media Center!

Hopefully MS will complete their bugfix soon so everyone can get a stable rollup without these messy DRM problems.

What's new from Media Made Easy

Media Made Easy is set to release our newest media system. The **HDTV Server** is a gigantic leap forward in power and performance. Featuring video driven by a GeForce 7800GTX and onboard storage capacity of 1.5 TB, this system takes no prisoners. With two standard and two high definition tuners it is a TV junkies dream. Check it out at <http://www.mediamadeeasy.net/HDTV.htm>

Introductory offer for all newsletter subscribers!

Order a Media Made Easy HDTV Server by March 30th, 2006 and receive a free iPod Nano 2GB. If you're interested please contact us.

Have questions, comments or ideas for us? Please email us with request for topics for the next newsletter. We want to get you the information you've been looking for. You can reach us at newsletter@mediamadeeasy.net.

You can find us on the Internet at <http://www.mediadeeasy.net/>
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