Microsoft's Improved Media Center Still Falls Short

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Microsoft's Media Center edition of Windows XP -- a special layer of software designed to let people enjoy their digital photos, music and videos from across the room -- has to rank as one of the company's bigger disappointments in a while. All the money Microsoft has thrown into promoting Media Center has yet to lend it any momentum in the market.

And yet it's a fascinating project to watch -- both because it might mark the birth of a much different form of personal computing, and because Microsoft often does get a product right after a few tries.

Media Center Edition 2005 represents the third go-round. It adds some interesting capabilities, plus a wireless-networking option that should have been offered at the start, but the changes can't outweigh the basic flaws that have dragged down this software from the start. Instead of a third attempt, it feels more like a third strike.

Media Center provides what Microsoft calls a "10-foot interface," a combination of a simplified front-end for Windows' music, photo and video software and a remote control that lets you watch and listen from the couch. Such a computer could take the place of a TV and stereo. There's the problem: Unless you devote a separate computer for Media Center use, you will either need an enormous (and enormously expensive) screen to make your e-mail legible from the couch, or you'll need to keep a desk chair handy for up-close use. Most living rooms don't lend themselves to that arrangement.

With this Media Center 2005 update, Microsoft has filled some holes in earlier versions, but it's yet to deliver something that justifies dedicating an entire computer to life as a Media Center. Especially if that computer, like the Toshiba Qosmio F15-AV201 laptop Microsoft loaned, costs $2,600.

The biggest change in this 2005 release is an expanded set of photo-editing tools, designed for use from across the room with the remote control. You can now fix red-eye effects, adjust a picture's contrast and even crop it, then burn a photo album to CDs or DVDs (although the disc-burning screen invites confusion by presenting "audio CD" as the default choice). These automated, one-button shortcuts worked surprisingly well. But how often will you want to edit a picture from that far away?

Media Center's revised photo-album component still suffers irksome flaws. When scanning through large collections of photos, the right-arrow key doesn't move you from one row to the next, only within rows. And when you're done touching up a picture, using the back button will first present you a view of that photo before your edits.

Moving on to digital music, you can now add individual songs and albums to a queue of upcoming music, then burn playlists or albums to CD, again only by pushing buttons on the remote. But it's far too easy to empty that queue by pressing the wrong button.
For a time, the Media Center software refused to burn song files purchased off Microsoft's MSN Music store, claiming a "license violation" (even though the copy of Windows Media Player 10 on that laptop burned the same playlist without objection).

Media Center's Web radio feature remains a joke; it only presents two, extra-cost services run by MSN and Napster, with no easy way of adding your own stations to those presets.

As before, Media Center can record TV broadcasts to the computer's hard drive, using a simple onscreen guide to show what's coming up next -- it's like TiVo without the monthly fee. The 2005 edition adds support for high-definition digital-TV broadcasts (although the Qosmio only included an analog tuner) and can burn recordings to DVD.

But Microsoft forgot to provide any way to edit recordings, a function stand-alone DVD recorders began offering two years ago. Not only can you not cut out the ads, you can't even strip out the footage from the earlier show that often winds up at the start of a timed recording.

Meanwhile, the entire justification for Media Center's TV-recording capability is getting sandblasted by the widespread availability of cheap, simple digital video recorders from cable and satellite services.

The last piece of the Media Center puzzle is a separate box, the Media Center Extender, that presents a Media Center computer's contents on a TV and stereo. I tested HP's $300 x5400 model, a slab designed to be stacked on top of a stereo. This was a disaster, possibly the worst wireless media receiver I have ever used.

Forget the jargon-laden setup, or the way it twice denied access to songs I'd paid for on MSN Music; what killed this was the remote control's maddening sluggishness. It took a second or more for commands by the remote to take effect, even just to change the volume.

Music playback was mostly reliable, but live or recorded TV varied between near-paralysis (with the screen mostly frozen) and merely annoying (when I moved the Extender, the Toshiba laptop and my WiFi access point within four feet of one another, I saw only occasional interruptions in video playback).

How could this work so atrociously when other wireless receivers have done fine on my wireless network? An Extender depends completely on the Media Center PC for not just the music, photos and videos it presents, but even the icons and menus it displays on the TV. It can't even respond to its own remote control; it has to relay those commands to the Media Center, which will then tell it what to do. That requires constant, high bandwidth.

Microsoft developers suggested ways to reconfigure my network for better performance -- for instance, connecting the Media Center laptop into my WiFi access point's Ethernet port (unplugging my desktop in the process), or setting my network to exclude slower WiFi devices (like my work laptop). But the reality is that many wireless networks are as unready for an Extender as mine was, and will need new wireless gear.

If I'm going to go to that kind of trouble, there had better be more of a reward than Media Center 2005 offers.

Living with technology, or trying to? E-mail Rob Pegoraro at rob@twp.com.

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