



Entertainment PC

Everyone seems to be telling us that spending hundreds of pounds on new kit is the only way to be able to enjoy music, video, photos and digital TV and control the lot centrally. But Windows XP users have pretty much everything they need already. Rosemary Haworth provides the missing links

There's much talk in PC circles at the moment about a concept called the digital hub – a central device connecting and controlling a range of electronic hardware on which music, video, DVD and photos are stored. There's a number of takes on this idea with a great deal of discussion about whether the hub should be TV- or PC-based.

Naturally, manufacturers in both the consumer electronics and PC markets want you to buy into their individual concept and stick with their branded range of goods. This ensures seamless integration between components for you and big profits for them.

PC users have a headstart here. Most of us already have a machine that's capable of performing the majority of functions this grand vision is likely to encompass. Windows XP, for instance, provides tools for storing, recording and enjoying various forms of digital media so adding and integrating the outstanding functions is fairly simple.

Over the next few pages we'll prove just how easy it can be, explaining how to turn your XP machine into a home entertainment centre and highlighting what you'll save by putting together your own system.

Adding a TV card and remote control



1 Turn off your PC, disconnect all cables and unscrew the cover. Earth yourself so no static electricity damages your PC's components. Locate a spare PCI slot next to the graphics and modem cards on the motherboard and remove the blanking plate so the card's connectors will be accessible once the PC case is replaced. Ease the TV tuner card into position and push down firmly so it is properly connected. Use the retaining screw from the blanking plate to secure the card



2 Replace the PC cover, reattach all cables and peripherals. If the tuner card came with a remote control attach its infrared cable to a free USB port, ensuring the other end sits somewhere in line of sight so the controller can communicate with your PC. Attach the TV aerial and any signal boosting devices. Restart the machine and install the TV tuner and TV interface software

Let them entertain you

First, let's look at the competition. If you want to be able to enjoy and control your music, photos and downloads from your PC as well as using it to schedule and record TV shows, a system designed to fulfil all your entertainment needs may be the answer.

Many PC retailers will now sell you just that. Head to the websites of Systemax (www.systemax.co.uk), Hi-Grade (www.higrade.com), PC World's Advent range (www.pcworld.co.uk) or smaller contenders such as Terraview (www.terraview.co.uk) and Shepley (www.shepleydirect.co.uk). Here you'll find fairly inexpensive PC setups for music, video and digital TV.

Alternatively, there's Microsoft's long-awaited Media Centre Edition PCs – a superset of XP with a funkier look and a few fun features over and above those found in its free Media Player and Digital Media Edition applications (see last month's XP Advisor for more on the latter).

Media Centre is Microsoft's attempt to make a name for its self in the living room. Rather than a cluttered desktop you

get a front end that resembles the big, bold menus found on DVDs and interactive TV channels and a matching remote with one-button access to My Music, My Videos and so on.

One of Media Centre's key selling points, Microsoft claims, is that you no longer need to be tethered to your desk and keyboard. Its remote control lets you take charge of your evening's entertainment while relaxing with your mates on the sofa.

As long as you've got a spare USB slot you can do the same for very little outlay. We got Shuttle's XPC Free remote control (£27 ex VAT from www.over-clock.co.uk) but PC resellers stock a variety of models. Ensure you're getting a device that controls Windows though. If you're adding a TV tuner to your system (as we'll be doing later in this workshop) it should come bundled with a remote control. However it will probably only let you change channels, start and stop TV recording and playback.

Microsoft can't afford to get its take on the centrifed home entertainment system wrong and has therefore decreed that

Media Centre Edition OS won't be sold as a separate product. You will only be able to buy it as part of a preconfigured PC that has been specially designed to run the OS and the attendant hardware including remote control, DVD writer and TV tuner.

It's quite an expensive way of listening to music, watching home movies and recorded TV shows, but you do of course get a fully functioning, decently specced PC too. And if you're looking for a new setup, Media Centre's friendly approach may appeal.

System requirements are the same as those for Windows XP Professional but Microsoft is quite picky about the rest of the hardware provided by its manufacturing partners. Microsoft first demoed its Media Centre back in February. However, the company claims that the stumbling block to a European release (details of which were about to be announced as we went to press) is finding a suitable, reliable EPG (electronic programme guide).

An evaluation version of Windows XP Media Centre Edition can be found at www.microsoft.com/windowsxp/mediacenter/evaluation/tours/default.asp.

Become self-centred

But why pay a premium for a whole new system when it costs next to nothing to create your own?

Yes, the Media Centre Edition interface has been simplified and information is displayed in bigger type so you can navigate your Media Centre desktop from the comfort of your sofa. However, it is just an interface and as soon as you start browsing your PC's hard drive you're back to familiar territory with track listings and filenames displayed in the usual directory fashion.

Once you start trying to trawl through menus we reckon you'll be squinting if you attempt to select MP3 files at a distance – you'll soon be up off the sofa and hovering in front of your PC screen.

We found navigating the screen using the mouse controls on our Shuttle remote control quite fiddly. While this will probably be less of an issue on a dedicated Media Centre Edition system, it's better to set up your photo slideshow or evening's playlist in advance and then simply play, pause, fast forward or skip tracks or images.

Windows Media Player 9.0 will make managing your music and video collection a real joy, so if you've not already upgraded do so now by downloading it from Microsoft's website. If you've copied the vast majority of your CD collection on to your hard drive then you may like the idea of being able to queue up hours of tracks at a time.

We've also invested in a copy of the Digital Media Edition Plus Pack which allows users to theme the evening's entertainment with Media Player skins. The Party Mode feature lets you decide what's played back and you can choose whether or not your guests can edit your choices while keeping them well away from the rest of your PC's contents.

Pictures tell a thousand words

Digital photo fans are already well catered for both by XP itself and by the huge number of commercial editing applications available for every budget and ability. In addition, there are packages that help with photo library management and displaying images as a slideshow.

For more control, try ShowShifter 2.0 (£31 ex VAT from www.showshifter.com) which is great for showing off your digital photos and provides other features similar to Media Player. It also integrates with an EPG for digital TV, although it doesn't work with the TV tuner cards we tried.

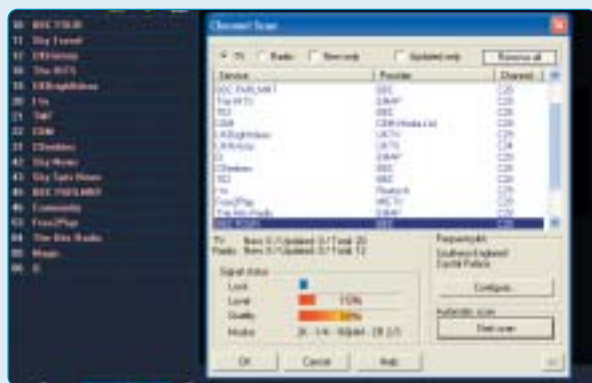
It's worth getting hold of Microsoft's Movie Maker 2.0, which you can download from www.microsoft.com/moviemaker. Again, the add-on Digital Media Edition Plus Pack (around £15 from www.amazon.co.uk) extends and refines the controls available for photo fans.

Lights, camera, action

Making your own movies on a desktop PC used to be a complicated, time-consuming affair but applications such as Roxio's £50 Easy CD Creator and freebies like Movie Maker 2.0 turn it into a simple drag-and-drop affair.

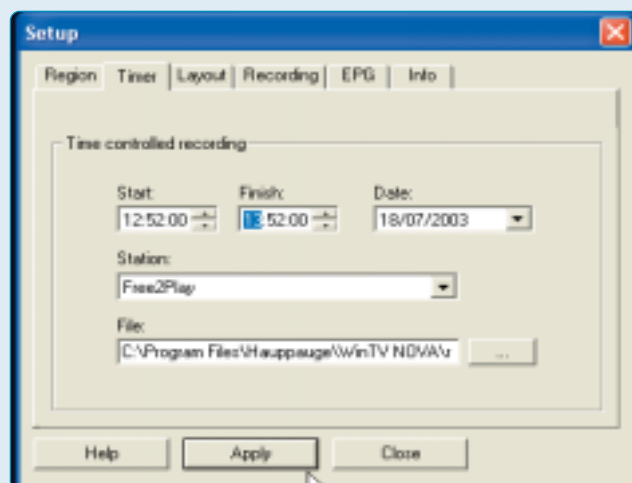
Many digital cameras now come with at least a limited movie capture function and, as long as you have a sufficiently capacious flash memory storage card, you can download them straight to your

Setting up digital TV software



1 Launch the digital TV application. Wait while the Mpeg-2 encoder initialises and the program runs a check to confirm the necessary hardware is present. Before you can start enjoying digital TV and radio you'll need to tell your PC where to look for them. Use the setup function (usually indicated by a tools icon) and select United Kingdom then the satellite receiver nearest to you.

Tell the software to scan for channels. This takes a few minutes and the status of the channels found should be colour-coded to show which are TV and which are radio stations, as well as whether the signal is strong enough



2 If you want to record TV to your hard disk, you simply need select the channel and hit the onscreen Record button (or the relevant button on your remote control if one was provided with your tuner card).

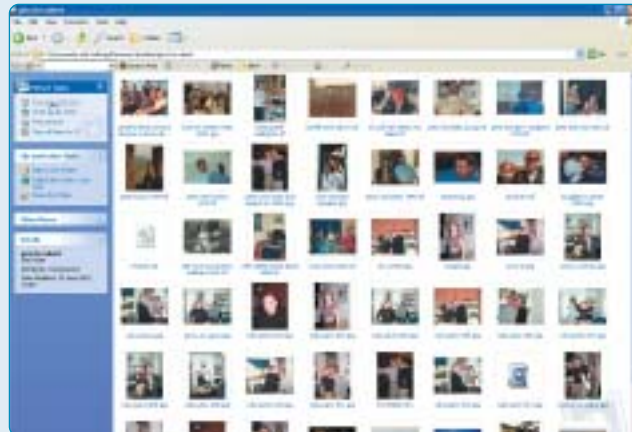
To schedule a program for automatic recording, go to the Setup menu and select the time, date and channel using the spinner and the drop-down menu for the available channels. Note that your PC will need to be switched on in order for recording to take place

Creating playlists and slideshows



1 To enjoy digital audio, photos and video from the comfort of your armchair, it's best to organise your entertainment in advance. Choose or create a playlist in Windows Media Player or select songs and videos and right-click to cue them using the Queue it up function. You can reorder this by dragging titles up and down the list at will.

Use your remote control to skip through or replay your selection as the mood takes you. Better still, use the Party Mode feature in Plus Digital Media Edition and put your entire music collection on random



2 The simple way to show a slideshow is to select a folder of images, right-click the first picture and tell XP to display the lot as a slideshow.

If you want to get a bit more adventurous, load up Movie Maker 2.0 and select the media type you want. Browse to import images and drag them on to the timeline at the bottom of the screen. Choose any accompanying audio tracks and, if you wish, add titles and credits, fades and transitions. When you're happy with the content, select Save to my computer and Movie Maker will do the rest

PC via a USB connection and splice together clips with ease.

Digital camcorder owners will probably want to invest in a FireWire video capture card as these offer faster downloads and result in fewer dropped frames. An internal or external DVD writer will cost you around £200, but if you simply want to view DVDs you can get an internal drive for as little as £50 from Dabs.com or other component vendors.

Depending on the connections on your TV and VCR, you should be able to hook up these devices to your PC using S-Video and RCA connections and capture analogue video to your PC too. A FireWire card comes in handy here too. If your TV setup is fairly basic or a few years old you may need an external box (try one from the VideOh range at www.adaptec.co.uk) to provide the missing links.

One hundred channels and still nothing to watch

Before you splash out £100 on a set-top box to allow you to watch digital channels on your analogue TV, you can get the same

effect on your PC with an internal or external digital TV tuner for around £50.

Be warned, though, you'll need a strong TV signal (the jury's out on whether a booster aerial makes any odds), preferably of the fixed roof aerial variety or, failing that, a powered antenna. That's assuming, of course, digital TV is available in your area. Check your postcode at www.freeview.co.uk.

You can record digital TV programmes in much the same way you would with a video recorder. The software interface on the products we tried – the AverTV DVB-TV, Hauppauge's WinTV and Adaptec's external VideOh TV card – all have schedulers that let you program what you want to record.

Alternatively, you can record what's on TV now and set the duration or start and finish times. You can also limit recording to a few minutes at a time if you don't have much hard disk space at your disposal. Of course, recorded programmes (as well as your own home movie creations) can be burned to CD or DVD, freeing up hard disk space and

providing permanent copies for you to enjoy time and again.

What isn't yet handled particularly well is advance notice of the TV programmes coming up. There's no standardised European EPG as digital TV services are still relatively new here, so you'll need to buy a TV guide or take pot luck.

Over time, integrated entertainment services will become more refined and sophisticated but, as ever, the lack of consistent connections and data transfer protocols is a bit of an issue right now. So unless you're really after a whole new dedicated system geared up for every facet of home entertainment, follow our advice and save yourself money.

Get yourself a remote control, a TV card or digital receiver, put your photo or music collection on random play and chill out in your living room to your very own multimedia entertainment centre. Enjoy. ■



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