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Ex.1032 / Page 1 of 3
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The Washington Post
Democracy Dies in Darkness

BUSINESS

MythTV Invades Realm of Cable and TiVo

By Chris Barylick
March 25, 2006 at 7:00 p.m. EST

In 2002, amidst a bulky, advertising-laden digital television experience, programmer Isaac Richards took matters into his own hands -- he began to build his own digital video recorder system from scratch.

Now known as the MythTV project (http://www.mythtv.com), Richards's effort to create DVR systems from commonly available computer components and the Linux open-source operating system, is gaining traction on the Internet.

MythTV recorders function much like the popular TiVo digital video recorder in that they schedule recordings, rewind, fast forward, pause and play live video as well as perform most of the functions of a desktop PC.

The recorders, which are bought as kits and assembled and configured by the users, generally sell for less than $700 -- a steep price for a DVR, compared with the $10 to $20 monthly fees that TiVo and cable TV companies are charging for their recorders and service. But MythTV recorders allow users to enhance the box through software that's continually under development and widely available at no charge across the Internet.

The MythTV project is centered on the idea of creating a low-cost home entertainment control unit that can be almost anything the user would like it to be. Software modules, once installed, can provide an array of bells and whistles to use.

For example, a video module within the MythTV software may control playback while music and DVD management programs store media libraries to use later. An Internet software module might allow the unit to use a Web browser, make VoIP-based telephone calls, videoconference and access podcasts. Additional features include full access to MythWeather, a free weather-tracking plug-in that uses MSNBC's weather links for its information; and MythNews, a live news link hooked into an auto-updating Internet feed and CD and DVD importing features.

Once limited to enthusiasts looking for the challenge of hunting for computer parts and configuring bleeding-edge hardware, MythTV boxes have become more accessible, with several vendors now selling packages for the market.

For nearly $700, users can buy a pre-configured, pre-tested Digital Video System model from MagicITX (http://www.magicitx.com) that can be quickly set up with minimal configuration.

Hayward, Calif.-based manufacturer iDOTpc (http://www.idotpc.com) has recently begun to offer a configuration popular with users involved with the project. From the software end, configuration of the device is becoming much easier.

Ex.1032 / Page 2 of 3
LG Electronics, Inc.

The KnoppMyth project (http://mysettopbox.tv/knoppmyth.html), begun by programmer Cecil Watson, is an effort to simplify the setup of the MythTV box.

After a MythTV box has been unpacked and connected to a television and Internet connection, users can download the free software from the Internet, burn it to a CD-ROM, and then load the software onto the MythTV box via a 25-minute installation process. The software then downloads 13 days of television listings, from which the user can begin picking out which shows to begin recording.

The MythTV project's creators are also working on support for high-definition TV computer cards that can play back video at full quality.

The adaptability also puts MythTV in a good position for growth. Digital video recorders of some sort are expected to be in about 58 million homes by 2010, up from today's estimated total of 6 million.

In the end, Richards, the programmer who launched the MythTV project, may just achieve his goal of creating a better digital cable box, by having picked up legions of programmers across the Internet with a similar vision.

MythTV, an idea owned by no one and powered by an ever-growing number of software applications that help boost the device's functionality, could fill in where similar devices leave off -- all for the price of a cheap PC.

Not bad, considering this all started when a programmer became irritated with his cable TV service and decided to tell a few friends about it.

Ex.1032 / Page 3 of 3
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