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Thursday, Nov 18, 2004

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Home computers for the Holidays

The coming season might be a good time to think about putting a new PC or Mac under your tree.

BY JULIO OJEDA-ZAPATA
Pioneer Press

Home computers seem particularly enticing this holiday season.

Windows PCs have evolved into multimedia powerhouses that deftly handle music, photos and video, including home movies and TV. Stylish Macintosh machines have become more compact and affordable.

Whatever your gift-giving budget, I found Windows and Mac models worthy of your attention.

The good news doesn't end there. With an array of add-on devices, PCs and Macs are able to extend their influence from the home office into the den or family room. I tested several such gizmos and found they're worth the extra cash.

PC MEDIA CENTERS

If you're buying a Windows PC for general home use, you might as well get one with a version of the Windows XP operating system called Media Center Edition 2005.

Such computers are home-media nerve centers controlled with a TV-style remote — one usually is included — as well as a mouse and keyboard. Lean back with the clicker to peruse your digital tunes, photos and movies using big, easy-to-read on-screen controls.

Earlier Media Center PCs all included TV-tuner cards for recording TV. Now, you can get a model

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without a TV card, which makes it more affordable. But, if you have a bit of extra cash, opt for a PC with two or three cards for recording and watching multiple TV shows simultaneously. Media Center PCs from an expanded array of vendors now come in many shapes and sizes. Some look like audiovisual components on the assumption they'll be hooked up to TVs in dens. Others are available in laptop form, but most look much like standard desktop PCs.

Models I tried: I took a trio of Media Center PCs for test drives (see box for specs).

One version from Minneapolis-based Reason Computer sported two TV tuner cards. Versions from Sony and Gateway had one card each, but the PCs are easily expandable.

If space is at a premium, the cube-like Reason PC may be your best bet. It looks sharp, too, with black-and-silver detailing and a bluish glow. The other PCs are tower-shaped.

Microsoft says its updated Windows Media Center Edition boasts improved video quality, but I thought recorded TV shows looked sensational only on the Gateway model.

Sony offered the most enticing package overall, though, with a jaw-dropping 23-inch flat-panel display that matches its PC's jet-black look but induces sticker shock at \$2,000.

Add-on products: Microsoft's Media Center technology is no longer confined to the computer. Let's say your PC is in your home office, but you want to watch your recorded "Sopranos" episodes on the TV in your den.

If the PC is on a high-speed wireless network and you hook a Linksys device called a Media Center Extender to the TV, you're good to go. Using the Linksys' remote, you can pull up Tony along with your pictures and unencrypted music on the TV screen.

This worked well with all three of my test PCs at my office desk along with a Philips flat-panel TV and a Media Center Extender in another room.

Microsoft's Xbox video-gaming console will double as a Media Center Extender with an add-on kit, which includes a remote, but it doesn't have built-in wireless networking as the Linksys does. When I plugged an Xbox into my wireless network via an Ethernet cable, though, it did the Media Center thing flawlessly.

Want TV to go? Transfer your shows to a handheld Portable Media Center device. I earlier told you about a bulky but versatile Creative Zen model from Creative Technology. Samsung and iRiver also make PMCs, but I hadn't tested them at press time and can't attest to their reliability.

APPLE MACINTOSH

The vast majority of home computers run Windows, and that isn't necessarily a good thing. Such PCs have long been beset by viruses, spyware and other infestations. That's partly because Windows is such a tempting target and partly because Microsoft often borders on the incompetent in plugging up security holes.

Macintosh computers offer relief from all of that. Its Mac OS X operating system isn't impregnable, by any means, but attacks on it are virtually nonexistent.

The Mac is appealing for other reasons. OS X is easy to use. Slick software Apple puts on every Mac gives you mastery over digital music, photos and home video. Macintosh machines are chic and reasonably priced for what they offer.

What Apple doesn't provide is a Media Center Mac with TV features. The Mac maker has so far ceded this market to Microsoft — and to Mac-device makers such as El Gato Systems that have tried with limited success to match the Media Center PC experience.

Models I tried: I took a couple of recent-model Macs for test drives (see box for specs).

On the affordable end, I sampled an iBook laptop with a 12-inch screen and sub-\$1,000 price tag, a breakthrough for Apple as it competes with Windows laptops costing as little as \$600. With integrated Wireless Fidelity networking, a recent power boost and much-smaller dimensions than entry-level Windows laptops, this mini-Mac is worth a look.

A bit more money gets you a slightly faster processor, a 14-inch display and a DVD burner (the 12-incher records CDs but only reads DVDs).

In the desktop category, Apple offers what is arguably the most appealing consumer computer on the planet. Its iMac G5 seems to be nothing more than a flat-panel display until you look closely and realize all its innards are built into a svelte enclosure atop a metal stand. With the G5 processor found in professional Macs, it has power aplenty, too.

Versions with 17- and 20-inch displays are available. Prices start at \$1,299, but the sweet spot is \$1,499 for a 17-incher with a DVD burner.

Add-on gear: Focus on a few basics first. Neither the iBook nor the iMac comes with enough memory, so spend a little extra to get the machines up to at least 512 megabytes.

You may also want Bluetooth, a wireless technology that lets you sync your Mac with input devices, handheld computers and other hardware. If so, ask for it up front so it's built into your Mac. The iMac doesn't have Wi-Fi networking, so you'll need a card for that.

Apple offers a Media Center Extender of sorts in its AirPort Express device. If hooked up to a stereo in a home with a Wi-Fi network, the white bricklike gizmo can pipe music from a Macintosh or Windows PC over the stereo speakers.

The AirPort Express, which plugs directly into an electrical wall outlet, also serves as a Wi-Fi access point for giving multiple Macs or PCs high-speed wireless access to the Net and each other.

The closest Apple equivalent to a Portable Media Center is its iPod Photo, a version of its music player that also displays photos (see a review in Tuesday's Pioneer Press). It also works with PCs as well as Macs.

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