



Ten O'Clock Tech

PCs For Couch Potatoes

Mark Hazlin, 07.09.04, 10:00 AM ET

Since the dawn of human creation, the prehensile thumb has been at the cutting edge of progress. Without it we would never have been able to make fire, hold a spear or--most importantly--operate a remote control. In the quest to converge the television and the computer, the thumb is once again at the forefront.

While companies like **TiVo** (nasdaq: [TIVO](#) - news - people) have had some success making the TV smarter, others have been working to make the computer act more like a TV. **Microsoft** (nasdaq: [MSFT](#) - news - people), for instance, has been trying to drag the computer into the living room with its Media Center PCs that are essentially all-in-one home entertainment systems.

Last week, we tried out an inexpensive version of that idea that needs little more than a working thumb. The **Firefly**, a remote control made by privately held **SnapStream Media**, lets you browse through music and video files--or any others on your computer--using what looks like a TV remote. In a demo version, the Firefly was shown flipping through pages of a PowerPoint presentation, but its main purpose is to give users easy access to their computer's media files.

The Firefly's software was easy to install via a CD-ROM. Once set up, the navigation pages show up full screen with big letters and images so they can be seen from across the room. The Firefly can scroll through various menus or change the volume using up and down arrows, just like on any other remote. It lets users easily cycle through music, photos, DVDs or other video, among other options.

Although we didn't have a lot of media stored on our office PC, we were able to call up Windows Media Player, as an example, and navigate using a mouse control button on the remote. It wasn't as easy as the regular mouse on the desktop but could be in future versions of the software.

Last week, the company released SnapStream Spotlight, a complementary service that allows streaming and downloading of premium content from various providers on the Internet including **Roxio's** (nasdaq: [ROXI](#) - news - people) **Napster**, **NewsGator**, **Lions Gate Entertainment's** (amex: [LGF](#) - news - people) **CinemaNow**, **Movielink** and **Live365**. Most of them are subscription based, but we watched a few minutes of a film purchased from Movielink, which is a joint operation of several movie studios including **Viacom's** (nyse: [VIAb](#) - news - people) **Paramount Pictures**, **Sony Pictures**, **Time Warner's** (nyse: [TWX](#) - news - people) **Warner Brothers**, **Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer** (nyse: [MGM](#) - news - people) and **GE's** (nyse: [GE](#) - news - people) and **Vivendi's** (nyse: [V](#) - news - people) **Universal Studios**. Watching a downloaded movie was no different than watching a movie on a laptop with a DVD player. We did try out some of the free stuff, like Live365's radio stations, which were nice to work to. But who needs a remote when your working?

The Firefly is ergonomically designed and comes in a metallic-silver color. It has about the same amount of buttons as a typical remote. However, it uses radio frequency technology, which means you don't have to point it directly at the computer or monitor, but you do have to hook up a receiver through your universal serial bus port. It works from a distance of 30 feet and even through walls. You'd have to have a pretty big monitor to see anything from further away than that. It is available for \$50 at retailers including **Fry's Electronics**, select **CompUSA** stores, **Amazon.com** (nasdaq: [AMZN](#) - news - people) and directly from [SnapStream's Web site](#).

But, as great an idea as a computer remote may be, it has its drawbacks. To begin, most people interact with their computers from 12 to 24 inches away. There's no need for a remote when you have a mouse and keyboard in arms reach. Plus, computers tend to be used in many other rooms besides the living room; it's not clear that a remote control, no matter how good, is going to change that.

Even if you wanted to lounge on the sofa and watch a DVD on the computer, most monitors are 15 or 17 inches, while TVs average 27 inches or larger. **Apple Computer** (Nasdaq: [AAPL](#) - news - people) just announced it will offer a new 30-inch liquid crystal display, those will be rare, (SnapStream's product doesn't work with the Mac anyway) and it doesn't change the fact that everyone will eventually have to buy bigger monitors or connect the PC to the TV before computer remotes reach a critical mass.



Courtesy Snapstream
SnapStream's Firefly PC remote lets users access files from distances of up to 30 feet.

Although the remote is relatively affordable, having to buy the content from SnapStream's premium providers would add hundreds of dollars to your existing cable TV bill; even more if you buy a lot of songs or movies. Accessibility is another issue. Mining through video files stored on a computer takes time, whereas simply watching TV or a DVD is more or less a no-wait, no-effort experience.

Finally, who needs another remote to lose between the cushions?

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