

## SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER

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### Review: Remote enables media center PCs

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A new remote control makes playing a computer's music, videos, TV programs and photos as easy from a couch as it is from an uncomfortable office chair.

That's important if PCs are going to find a regular spot in the living room entertainment center. Computers must run software viewable from a distance and controllable with something more coffee table-friendly than the keyboard and mouse.

SnapStream Media Inc.'s Firefly remote and accompanying software represent an advance on both fronts.

Like Microsoft Corp.'s Media Center, SnapStream brings together disparate programs with one key difference: Firefly can run on any recent Windows PC, not just those decked out to Microsoft's Media Center specifications.

The Firefly package relies on additional programs that actually handle the video, songs and pictures. Most are free or already bundled with Windows 98 or later, which is required anyway. Some features, such as watching live TV, require additional hardware and software.

An abundance of options makes the \$50 Firefly more attractive than Media Center, which isn't even available as a standalone program. With Firefly, users can select the features they want without paying for things they aren't going to use.

I found installation simple thanks to instructions that clearly warn users to load the software before plugging the remote's USB receiver into the computer. The software, which loads automatically at reboot, must be running on the PC for the remote to work.

The remote is attractive, though I'd like it even more if it could be programmed to replace controls for my TV and stereo. Firefly, however, uses a radio frequency signal that has a range of 30 feet and can pass through walls, unlike most other clickers, which are infrared devices.

Firefly's Beyond Media Basic program is launched simply by hitting the "Firefly" button on the remote. That brings up an attractive, full-screen directory for turning on the PC's DVD player, picture viewer, jukebox and other programs.

Like Microsoft-sanctioned Media Centers, there's room for improvement, particularly when using programs that require text input or Web pages not meant for viewing from 10 feet away.

Text entry doesn't work, even though its numerical keypad is labeled with letters much like a telephone keypad.

To use Apple Computer Inc.'s iTunes, I had to rely on a "Mouse" button, which turns the remote into a mouse-like pointing device using buttons for up-and-down and left-and-right movements as well as two other buttons for left- and right-clicking. It would be cumbersome to have to use it repeatedly.

And that did nothing to help view the program's tiny text.

Beyond Media's default media programs - a scaled down Windows Media Player, for instance - worked best. They easily found my music and photos on my computer. I was impressed with the ability to rotate and zoom in or out of photographs using just the remote.

FireFly, of course, launches SnapStream's Beyond TV for watching and record television programs, provided you have purchased the software and hardware separately. (It also supports Beyond TV's rival, SageTV.)

One of the newest Beyond Media features is SnapStream Spotlight, which features a variety of third-party software designed for the media center environment. In fact, the package very strongly resembles Microsoft Media Center's Online Spotlight.

SnapStream Spotlight is basically an opportunity for companies to sell music (Roxio's Napster), movies (CinemaNow and Movielink) and radio (Live365). Be prepared to whip out a credit card to pay - and a keyboard to register in most cases.

Though Firefly is a great way to try out the media center concept without investing in a Media Center, I'm skeptical of standalone PCs becoming commonplace in the living room.

There's not only competition from relatively inexpensive devices that stream content over home networks, but also standalone boxes like TiVo that don't carry the overhead - and extra cost - of Microsoft's Windows operating system.