



home box office

Grab the popcorn, turn down the lights and fire up your own cinema experience at home. We track the latest technologies.

As recently as five years ago, having a home theatre simply meant you had your television hooked up to external speakers. While this is still where the road begins, rapidly advancing technology means the combination of equipment in your living room is limited only by your imagination and your budget.

As the name says, the most basic function of home theatre is to give you a cinematic experience at home. These days, this starts with two things: high-definition television (HDTV) and surround sound.

When choosing a television, you'll have two main choices – definition and format. Definition can be either standard (SD) or high (HD), and the format is usually LCD, plasma or projector. The definition isn't much of a choice at all, really – if you're even entertaining the idea of building a system, it must be HD. Whether you choose LCD, plasma or a projector is entirely a matter of preference and logistics.

There's no truly right or wrong answer – each format has its pros and cons. LCD weighs less than plasma, so is more suited to wall-mounting.

Plasma is normally better for watching action scenes, because of its faster response times, although LCD is fast catching up.

Many people believe a projector is necessary for that true home cinema experience, but if your room isn't big enough, you're wasting your time. Perhaps its biggest drawback is that the room needs to be completely dark – which usually means specialty curtains as well. One of the major attractions of a projector, however, is that the unit and the screen can be hidden away when not in use, leaving your interior decoration and artwork to shine.

Audio action

Whichever type of television you choose, you'll need to pair it with some high-quality audio if you're to get the best out of it.

Dolby Digital sound systems revolutionised the cinema experience in the early 1990s. Dolby traditionally uses six speakers, and most likely, your surround sound system at home will too. This is referred to as a 5.1 system – five speakers and one subwoofer. As a general

rule, these six speakers run off one central receiver, which is the hub of your system, through which you run your television and any other equipment you choose. If you only remember two points about surround sound, it's not to scrimp on the receiver, and heavier equipment usually means better quality.

Flexible programming

But there's no point having a great system if you're just going to be sitting there aimlessly flicking through channels. A good way is to pre-record all your favourite television on MySky. The major benefits of MySky are that you can record two shows at once, while watching

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a third, and you can record a whole series of your favourite show at the touch of a button. You also needn't worry about recording the wrong channel accidentally. Many people choose to get both MySky and a DVR, so they can burn shows they record on to DVD, freeing up room on their MySky hard drive.

Sky has recently released MySky HDI, which is more compatible with the newer HD televisions. It can even upgrade non-HD programs to a clearer HD format.

An alternative to MySky HDI is the TiVO, which comes with a raft of features, including a higher price tag. In addition to being able to record up to eight channels at once, TiVO can connect your home entertainment system to your music, photos and internet. This step represents the next level of home entertainment – connecting your television to your home network.

Generally speaking, it has only been early adopters who have used TiVO, because it hasn't been on sale here. But TiVO is now set for a pre-Christmas launch and with its broadband features and Freeview compatibility, it is likely to be popular.

Another way to synchronise your computer with your home entertainment system, is the more mainstream Playstation 3 (PS3), which can connect to your home network either directly or wirelessly. And if a Playstation 3 sounds like something an eight-year-old would play on, that's because it is – at least on the surface.

So, if today's ideal home theatre is fully integrated with the computers on your home network, what does the future hold? The most immediate improvement will be the continued development of HDTV, as all of our channels move to 100% HD broadcasting. There will also be more television and new-release movies available online, which will make linking your television to your home network more essential.

For the technophiles, the next major frontier is likely to be virtual reality. There are already wired gloves that give haptic (touch) feedback to users, and head-mounted displays that allow you to interact with games like Second Life or television. The latest research is even attempting to simulate smell.

As technology gets cheaper, these will become more accessible, but the word is still that the entertainment media has misrepresented the scope of virtual reality technology, and that what you see in the movies is still a few years away from your living room. So you may have to be content with your HDTV and recliner chair for a few more years yet! **H**

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Gaming for all

First, a quick history lesson. About eight years ago, gaming consoles went from being the sole preserve of children and teenagers, to being a part of home entertainment systems everywhere. This was largely due to the built-in DVD players of the Sony and Microsoft consoles, back when DVD players were still a relative novelty. This gave kids a formidable bargaining tool with parents – “But Mum... you can watch movies on it too!”

Nearly a decade on, seventh generation consoles are available – the PS3, Xbox 360 and the Nintendo Wii – all of which are internet enabled. Of the three, the PS3 is most at home in a living room, as it has the latest Blu-ray disc technology, which is widely considered to be the future of home video. Blu-ray produces a better quality picture and has more storage capacity than a DVD.

Investing in a gaming console for your living room can be a double-edged sword. While its other capabilities may be impressive, it must be remembered that it is still primarily built for gaming, and any children hanging around (think anyone under 30) will be keen to monopolise it.