

Setting Up Your Perfect Home Theater

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CONTENTS	1
INTRODUCTION.....	4
1 STEP ONE: KNOW WHAT YOU NEED	5
WHO IS THE HOME THEATER FOR?.....	5
WHAT IS YOUR TOP PRIORITY?	5
WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT MODERN ENTERTAINMENT TECH?.....	6
SO WHAT DO YOU NEED?	6
2 STEP TWO: KNOW YOUR BUDGET.....	7
HOW MUCH SHOULD YOU EXPECT TO SPEND?.....	7
How much to spend on what?.....	7
TIPS FOR SETTING UP ON THE CHEAP.....	7
Pawn Shops	8
Poaching.....	8
Older Models and Sales.....	9
3 AN INTRODUCTION TO HDTV SETS.....	10
HDTV: A PRIMER COURSE.....	10
NOTATION.....	11
Resolution.....	11
Scanning System	11
Frame Rate	12
THE BOTTOM LINE.....	12
4 AN INTRODUCTION TO SURROUND SOUND	14
THE SPECS	14
3.0 and 4.0 Channel Surround.....	15
6-track 5.1 Channel Surround	15
6.1 and beyond	15
A NOTE ON SELECTING A SPEAKER SET.....	16
5 AN INTRODUCTION TO BLU-RAY DVD.....	17
THE COST	18
THE FORMAT	18
6 PC CONNECTIVITY FOR THE TOTAL TECH NOOBIE	19
MUSIC	19
MOVIES	19

PC GAMING	19
CONVENIENCE.....	19
HDTV TO PC CONNECTIVITY: A HOW-TO	20
VGA	20
DVI	20
RESOLUTION ISSUES	21
7 VIDEO GAMES, DVD-R AND OTHER STUFF YOU DON'T NEED BUT MIGHT WANT	22
DVD-R	22
VIDEO GAMES	23
VIDEO CAMERAS	24
8 TIVO, NETFLIX AND DIRECTV: GETTING GOOD ENTERTAINMENT CHEAP	26
HULU.COM.....	26
TUNES	27
MOVIE AND MUSIC TRADING COMMUNITIES	27
DIRECTV	28
INTERNET RADIO AND PODCASTS.....	28
YOUTUBE.....	29
GETTING WHAT YOU WANT	29
9 WHERE TO BUY AND WHAT TO BUY (NOW THAT YOU KNOW WHAT YOU WANT)	31
READ A LOT OF USER REVIEWS.....	31
CHECK THE MESSAGE BOARDS	32
ELECTRONICS STORES	32
10 STAYING OUT OF DEBT: GETTING THE PERFECT SETUP WITHOUT LIVING BEYOND YOUR MEANS ...	33
USING CREDIT CARDS.....	33
CONCLUSION.....	35

I NTRODUCTION

We live in what you might call the Era of High Definition. Movies are shot in crystal clear HD, music is recorded in pristine HD sound, even television is broadcast in high definition. This is all well and good, but if you're still using one of those wood panel TVs with the dial to change the channels, then a fat lot of good all that HD does you.

Obviously, you can't watch high definition entertainment on a standard definition TV. Well, you can, but you'll be watching it in standard definition. So, if you've decided that it's time to upgrade, and not only to upgrade, but to outfit your den or living room with the full package, then you've just picked up the right e-Book. By the time you've finished reading this tome, you should be well equipped with the knowledge of what to buy, and how to get it without breaking the bank.

1

STEP ONE: KNOW WHAT YOU NEED

The first thing you'll want to consider: What's your bag? What is the main thing you plan to use your new home theater for?

Are you a gamer? An audiophile? A film buff? A sports fan? A trekkie?

The difference between the needs of a sports fan and a music collector, for example, is subtle, but it's there. What it comes down to is taking your budget, and putting that money where it matters the most.

So, if you're a sports fan, as big and hi-def a TV as you can get is obviously a higher priority than sound. If you're a music lover, you want the best sound system you can afford. If you're a film buff, then you need the best picture and sound you can get.

So, below, we'll list everything you need to take into consideration before you go shopping or even start setting your budget. This should help you to determine exactly what you're going to need to create a home theater you can be happy with...

WHO IS THE HOME THEATER FOR?

By this we mean... how would you describe your audience? Simply put, how many people do you think will be sitting in your living room with you while you're enjoying your new setup?

For a large family or for the sports fan who hosts the annual Superbowl party, screen size becomes more of a priority than it might be for the cinephile bachelor who just likes watching his favorite movies with a couple of friends now and then.

Of course, it's not a bad idea to get the biggest TV you can safely afford, but if that would mean skimping on the sound system or skipping the Blu-Ray DVD player, then it's a decision you'll want to weigh carefully.

WHAT IS YOUR TOP PRIORITY?

You can go ahead and admit that you spend a lot of time daydreaming about your perfect home theater set up. Now the question is, when you sit down and daydream about it, what's the first thing that pops into mind?

Whatever it is, make that the centerpiece of your home theater. If it's a gorgeous 1080p HDTV, then make your new TV top priority and let everything else work in its favor. If you see yourself watching movies with a rear projection TV in a room decked out with classic movie posters, then focus on the rear projection TV and what you can do to complete the experience. Heck, if the first thing that pops into your mind is a lush leather recliner, then focus on the leather recliner and then just think of what sort of TV would be great to watch while leaning back in your new throne.

The bottom line is that there's really no One True Way to set up your home theater. It's all about creating an entertainment experience that you can be happy with, and nobody knows what makes you happy better than you do.

For reference, this point trumps the above listed item. Maybe you plan on hosting big Superbowl games, but you know, if you're not going to be happy without that leather recliner, well, it's your money at the end of the day, and it's your call.

WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT MODERN ENTERTAINMENT TECH?

If you don't know Blu-Ray from HD-DVD, don't worry about it. By the end of this e-Book, you should have all the knowledge you'll need to shop wisely. Nonetheless, if you're clueless about LCDs, Plasma screens and Dolby Digital, then for now just worry about the general idea of your home theater, and worry about the specifics once you've read up on them a bit.

In other words, you wouldn't write a grocery list around a meal you don't know the recipe for, so don't worry about a shopping list for your home theater until you know exactly what you need.

SO WHAT DO YOU NEED?

You could say that there's an art to setting up a home theater. There should be a general feeling you want to enjoy when you're sitting in front of your new TV. Maybe you want to feel relaxed while watching a favorite movie, maybe you want to get pumped up for pay per view boxing events, or maybe you just want a comfortable spot to flop down in at the end of the workday.

Whatever the case may be, the point is that you should be able to close your eyes and picture yourself enjoying your home theater, and then figure out what you need to do to make that a reality.

2

STEP TWO: KNOW YOUR BUDGET

Of course, before you even pick up a catalog and start browsing, you need to know exactly how much you can safely spend on setting up your home theater.

There are a lot of people who just opt to put it all on a credit card and worry about it another day. This is great if you're rich and you always make your credit card payments on time, but for the rest of us, it's hardly recommendable.

First, it needs to be said that a home theater is a luxury expenditure. We're not talking about car repairs or a house payment. As much fun as you can have setting up and enjoying your home theater, at the end of the day, all you're really doing is watching TV, and it's important to set your budget carefully and to not get in over your head.

HOW MUCH SHOULD YOU EXPECT TO SPEND?

The truth is that the answer to this question will be different for every individual reading this e-Book.

Let's be frank: We don't know how much you make a year. You could be a Fortune 500 CEO adding a whole new room to the mansion, or a garage mechanic looking to deck out the living room with your Christmas bonus. It's really up to you to set your budget and know how much you can safely spend on your home theater. We're just here to guide you.

HOW MUCH TO SPEND ON WHAT?

As we said in the above chapter, you'll want to pick a centerpiece for your home theater. Whether it's the HDTV, the sound system or a luxurious leather recliner, it should be the focus of your budget. If you can only spend so much, then this piece is top priority, and everything else you can go ahead and just try to get as cheaply as possible.

TIPS FOR SETTING UP ON THE CHEAP

Now, it should be said that you don't need to spend a fortune to set yourself up with a great home theater. You don't need the absolute newest, top of the line HDTV, you don't need to grab every video game system available or outfit your living room with all new leather furniture.

You can buy a used or slightly older HDTV that still works as perfectly as anything else on the market. You can reupholster an old chair, or buy a friend's old sound system when he moves into a smaller place.

If money is no object, then, you know, you can go ahead and skip this whole chapter. However, if you've always wanted a great home theater setup and just haven't had the money, you can go ahead and start planning, anyways, because there are plenty of ways of attaining that lush entertainment setup of your dreams without breaking the bank.

In other words, don't think of your home theater as a pipe dream. There really is a home theater setup out there for every budget, whether you're willing to spend twenty grand to build a full-on mini-movie theater, or you've got a few hundred bucks burning a hole in your pocket. Obviously, the more money you have, the more options you have, but don't think for a second that a small budget means you have to settle for a crummy home theater.

PAWN SHOPS

As we've said before, a lot of people go out and get the biggest TV set they can find, and... put themselves in debt. They find that they're living beyond their means, and they have to lug that huge plasma-screen down to the local pawn shop for chump change.

Too bad for them, but this can be an opportunity for you.

Now, different pawn shops practice different rules. Some pawn shops might just take the seller's word for it that the TV works perfectly, while others will want to make certain. In any event, this means that you need to double check everything you buy at a pawn shop yourself. Don't fork over any cash until you've seen the item in action.

Whether it's an HDTV, a stereo system, or an Xbox 360, don't hand over a single dime until you've seen it work. By and large, pawn shops are fairly trustworthy, but every rule has its exceptions.

And of course, if it does work, it's not hard to find some great stuff through this method. You can easily score an HDTV set for a few hundred dollars where it usually goes for a couple grand in stores.

POACHING

This is what we call "the art of buying stuff off your buddies". Now maybe you don't know anyone willing to sell off their old stuff, but maybe you do, and you should be open to that opportunity when it presents itself.

Maybe your friend is moving, maybe they're upgrading their home theater, or maybe they just got married and they don't need two big screen TVs. Whatever the case may be, your buddy has the option of maybe selling their old stuff on eBay or to a pawn shop, or selling it to you for about the same price (or maybe cheaper), only without the hassle of registering it on craigslist or moving it over to the buyer's house.

OLDER MODELS AND SALES

Keep an eye on the catalogs for the local entertainment, electronics and department stores. Whenever a shiny new model rolls in, there's a tendency to slash prices on the older models and hold major sales.

The fact is that how old a TV set is doesn't really have much to do with how high quality it is. A lot of the newer model HDTV's don't really have anything on the older sets in that regard. Maybe they boast one or two new features that you'll never make use of, or maybe they're just plain newer. Regardless, if you know what you're buying, if you know what you're shopping for, there's no excuse not to pounce on the opportunity to get a great HDTV set on the cheap just because it came out in 2006.

3

AN INTRODUCTION TO HDTV SETS

As we've said above; By the end of this e-Book, you'll be armed with all the technical knowledge you'll ever need to set yourself up with a perfect home theater.

Don't worry, this chapter is not a tech manual and you won't need a degree from MIT to understand it. Rather, we'll just provide you with a crash course introduction to HDTV, essentially just what to look for and how to shop for them. What we're saying is; you don't need to be a total tech geek to know what you're doing at the electronics store, but it couldn't hurt to know what the sales clerk is talking about when he's using terms like 1080p, LCD and Dolby Digital.

Don't worry, it's really not complicated. If you can program a VCR, you can learn everything worth knowing about HDTV in a thousand words or less.

HDTV: A PRIMER COURSE

The essence of HDTV, Hi-def television, is simply that it allows for a clearer, better picture than you could get with a standard definition set. We'll try not to bore you too much, but get ready for a history lesson here.

When the technology was still new, early HDTV sets utilized analog signals, the same signals you'd get on a 12 inch color TV with bunny ears attached. However, as the technology advanced, it became clear that all-digital would be the way to go in order to attain the highest quality picture possible.

Simply put, digital compression allows for significantly more information to be stored in the same amount of space. You could compare it to, say, downloading an e-Book versus reading it in print. This e-Book you're reading right now, for example, takes up less than a fraction of a millimeter on your hard drive (well, depending on how old your computer is), but at ten chapters long, would take up quite a few pages of paper to print out.

Or to put it another way, a movie, when stored on the raw film, is miles and miles long. It's typically held in eight or more canisters of film, each one bigger around than a dinner plate and more than an inch thick.

However, on DVD, it's about as thick as a dime and as wide as a cereal bowl.

So, if you can store more information digitally than you can by analog, then it stands to reason that you can also transmit higher quality information with digital than you can with analog, simply by virtue of the fact that you can store more digital information about the quality of the sound and picture in code than you could by more practical means.

So that's the general premise in layman's terms, now let's move on before we delve too deeply into techno babble.

NOTATION

We can't recommend this or that brand over the other because, for one, nobody's paying us any sponsorship money here, so they can do their own advertising, but more importantly, brand name isn't really all that important. Sony has some great products out there, but so does Philips. All that really counts is that you know what you're buying.

That said, this is what you need to know before you go shopping for an HDTV: Notation. Notation is sort of just the "specs" on an HDTV. Where a car might have four wheel drive and passenger side airbags, an HDTV set has 1080p resolution. So let's just break this down into what you need to know before buying...

RESOLUTION

Resolution is typically counted in the number of pixels stretching vertically across the TV screen. If you're a total tech noobie, a pixel is just one tiny little square dot of color on the TV, and digital images are comprised entirely of those little dots. Take a moment to look up a picture of Pac-Man. Pac-Man, as he first appeared, has a very blocky look because he was only about sixteen pixels wide. So essentially, the more pixels wide your HDTV is, the better the picture quality will be.

The standard resolution for a big screen HDTV is usually 1080 (or 1,080 pixels tall), so to put that into perspective, Pac-Man would only take up about the space of a shirt button on such a TV.

SCANNING SYSTEM

Identified by the letter at the end of the resolution, for example, 1080p, where the letter P indicates progressive scanning. The letter I would indicate interlaced scanning.

If that's confusing, we'll break it down quickly here. Traditionally, a TV set doesn't just show a frame, and then pop up the next one, like a film

projector. Rather, one line of pixels at a time is drawn, faster than the eye can see, to create the effect of an animated image.

With progressive scanning, one line of pixels is drawn, and then the next is drawn, one after the other. With interlaced scanning, it's a little weird. First, all the odd numbered lines of pixels are drawn, and then all the even lined numbers.

Usually you won't be able to tell the difference, but sometimes you can, depending on what you're watching. If you can tell the difference, it's because you're watching interlaced scanning. In other words, if you have the option, go with progressive scanning.

FRAME RATE

Simply put, frame rate refers to how many frames per second you're watching. The best available frame rate is sixty frames per second, with most TVs giving you a frame rate of twenty five or thirty frames per second.

Now, since most movies and television shows are shot in thirty frames per second, the extra thirty frames per second you get with sixty FPS may seem a little pointless. However, with Blu-Ray and super hi-def filming catching on, you're likely to see more and more movies and shows shot at sixty frames per second.

If you're a gamer, many video games actually work at a higher rate than thirty frames per second, as well.

Now, beyond a certain point, the eye cannot tell the difference. It's different for each individual, but in general, past forty frames per second, it's going to look just the same whether it's one hundred FPS or one million FPS. Frames per second is important, but not as important as scanning system and resolution, so put this one at the bottom of the priority list when you go shopping for a new HDTV.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Of course, here's what it really comes down to: Do you like the TV?

Go into an electronics store. Even if you plan on shopping online, go ahead and get into a local Best Buy or something and just check out what they have to offer.

As you know, these places run up a princely electricity bill by keeping hundreds of TVs on at a time to show off what HDTV is capable of. So just browse around, look at what they have to offer, find the TV with the picture you like the most, and make a note of it.

You might not have to buy that TV, specifically, but make a note of the specs. 1080p may be top of the line, but if there was a 1080i that really caught your eye, then maybe you're in the market for a 1080i. If it's the exact same model you grew so fond of on your window shopping trip, all the better.

Because again, as we've emphasized more than once here, the bottom line is whether or not you're enjoying your entertainment experience. Top of the line or not, if you're not happy with your home theater, then you're not happy with your home theater, and that's all there is to it, so just buy what you like and don't sweat the details too much.

4

AN INTRODUCTION TO SURROUND SOUND

Admittedly, most of us probably prioritize the TV set over the sound setup. However, you might not want to be too hasty to neglect the sound.

It's something like test driving a nice car for the first time when you've never had anything but clunkers before. You really don't know what you're missing until you get a little taste.

Now, of course, if sound isn't that big a priority for you, we're not recommending that you go ahead and take a loan out and spend a few grand on a handful of speakers and a console. Rather, just as you can get a great TV for cheap, you can get a great sound system for cheaper.

If you've never really given it much thought before, here's what you want to do: Go check out a store that sells sound systems, and just give a few setups a test drive.

If you're not a big audiophile, then, well, you never know, you might just have a more well-tuned ear than you think. A few good speakers set up around the room really can make all the difference in the world. Besides, it's really not that expensive these days to set up a decent surround sound system. Maybe when the technology was new, a Dolby sound system would run you a few grand, but today you can easily get all the parts you need for about the cost of a few new DVDs.

And, again, just as with the HDTV sets, it really doesn't need to be all that complicated. There's only so much you actually need to know in order to make an informed decision when shopping for your sound setup.

THE SPECS

Now, the specs on your surround sound system won't be quite as cut and dry as with selecting an HDTV. Surround sound isn't just one category of technology or one type of product, but a broad field of various types of sound systems.

So, in the following sections, we hope to simply acquaint you with your options well enough that you can make an informed decision based on your home theater needs.

Of course, before we delve into this, we should point out that most movies, television shows, etcetera, do not really take full advantage of surround sound. The main point of surround sound is simply that it sort of envelops you in the world of what you're watching.

However, there are other movies that truly take the concept of surround sound to a whole new level. If you haven't watched *Apocalypse Now* in surround sound, for example, then you haven't truly watched *Apocalypse Now*. The famous shot where the helicopter flies over the camera, for example. In true surround sound, you'll hear the helicopter blades approaching from behind you, then overhead, and finally passing in front of you. It's truly a whole different movie, and you'll be glad you invested in surround for that purpose.

So if you're thinking of going with the full surround sound setup, go ahead and do a little research and pick out some movies that take full advantage of the technology. At the premier of *Apocalypse Now*, those in attendance are said to have ducked down and taken cover, believing that a chopper was actually flying directly over the theater. Recreating such an experience with some unsuspecting friends, then, will be worth the price of a great sound system alone.

3.0 AND 4.0 CHANNEL SURROUND

3.0 Channel refers to, well, how many channels of sound you have. A bare bones surround system will have one speaker for the main sound source and two extra speakers for stereo sound, left and right.

3.0 and 4.0 get the job done, and it's more than enough for most of the selections from your DVD library, but it's only marginally cheaper than a true surround system, and it just isn't quite the same.

6-TRACK 5.1 CHANNEL SURROUND

This is where we start getting serious. With five point one channel surround, you actually have six channels. Center, rear, left, right, left center, and right center.

Similarly, you have 5.1 3-2 stereo, which is left, right, center, surround right, and surround left.

In either event, this is where true surround sound really begins.

6.1 AND BEYOND

To give a full picture of just how far you can take surround sound, we would have to throw in a whole extra e-Book. We'll stop at 6.1 channel, as that's really as much as you'll probably ever need for a home theater.

6.1 channel surround typically features center, rear, left, right, center left, and center right channels. Simply put, for the best sound you could reasonably want from a home theater, you'll probably want to set up with 6.1 channel. Anything beyond this, and you're really just packing your home with more speakers than you'll ever need.

A NOTE ON SELECTING A SPEAKER SET

As we'll emphasize a bit more later on: Forget brand names. Check the online reviews, visit the message boards, and see what everyone is raving about.

If you're a millionaire, you can afford to just buy every speaker available and test it out for yourself. However, since most people aren't millionaires, it's advisable that you take advantage of the fact that you're lucky enough to be taking part in the information age. This is really what the internet is for: Creating a sort of collective database of knowledge. Somebody else's bad purchase can be your boon in that you now know better than to buy that product.

In short, trust the geeks on the web. By relying on the more technical knowledge of others, you can get away with a layman's understanding of the subject of surround sound, and still get the best possible setup you can get with your budget.

5

AN INTRODUCTION TO BLU-RAY DVD

If you remember a few years back, the Blu-Ray and HD-DVD formats were having an all out marketplace war, just as Betamax had with VHS decades earlier. To make a long story short, Blu-Ray won.

As of the time of this writing, Blu-Ray is not quite the dominant format just yet. DVD still reigns supreme just as VHS had while we were still all getting used to the idea of DVD. As such... you don't really need a Blu-Ray DVD player just yet.

The fact is, it's still hard to find a lot of your favorite movies on Blu-Ray, and because the distributors are still getting used to the technology, some Blu-Ray movies are really just standard definition flicks packed onto a high-end disc.

In short, Blu-Ray is more expensive and it's harder to find what you're looking for on the format.

That said, Blu-Ray is the Next Big Thing. In fact, by the time you read this, the format may already have all but replaced DVD. Blu-Ray offers better picture and sound quality, it can store more data, fitting an entire season of a TV series onto a single disc, and it just plain provides a more complete high definition viewing experience.

We'll take a second to remind you of something we mentioned in the chapter on surround sound: You really don't know what you're missing until you've seen a movie in Blu-Ray. The colors are more beautiful, more crisp, the image is crystal clear, even the blacks are more black in Blu-Ray.

But don't worry about it too much just yet.

As we said, Blu-Ray is still catching on, and it may be a couple years still before it really takes its place as the primary format for home video. It's still fairly expensive, at an average cost of fifty bucks a disc, and that price won't go down until Blu-Ray becomes more popular and the technology starts to age a bit. So before jumping on the bandwagon and dropping a few hundred bucks on a Blu-Ray player, you'll want to take a moment to consider whether or not it's a top priority.

THE COST

Again, if you've got the cash, go ahead and get a Blu-Ray player. For those of us not occupying the wealthiest one percent of the nation, though, you may want to consider if Blu-Ray is worth the cost.

A good Blu-Ray DVD player can cost anywhere from two hundred to six hundred dollars, or more, and then, of course, fifty dollars a disc. So you might wind up spending a thousand dollars and only having six or seven movies to watch on your fancy new Blu-Ray player. If you're living paycheck to paycheck, that's a lot of money for something you might only use once a month.

THE FORMAT

No doubt, most of the movies you own are on DVD. So let's say you trade in that DVD player for your shiny new Blu-Ray. Now you have a library of dozens of movies you can't watch, and it will take thousands of dollars to replace on Blu-Ray, if you can find those movies on Blu-Ray in the first place.

In short, what we're saying is simply to give it time. It's probably a safe bet that everyone will be watching Blu-Ray in 2011, but as of the time of this writing, it's too expensive, too rare, and too troublesome to really bother with... unless you've got the cash and don't mind spending it. However, if you actually bothered reading the second chapter of this e-Book, if you didn't have the cash to safely skip the section on arranging your budget, then we recommend giving it another year or two before jumping on the Blu-Ray bandwagon.

6

PC CONNECTIVITY FOR THE TOTAL TECH NOOBIE

Now, why bother connecting your HDTV to your PC when you've got DirecTV on-demand and a perfectly good DVD player sitting right there?

Well, because not everything is available on DirecTV and DVD, that's why.

By plugging your PC into your TV, you get to do a few things you couldn't otherwise...

MUSIC

You can play all of your MP3s on your surround sound system. Now that's definitely preferable to listening to them on cheap computer speakers or having to burn some songs to a CD whenever you want to listen to them in high quality.

MOVIES

Now that Netflix allows you to download movies to your PC, including rare movies that have never been released on DVD, PC-connectivity may well be the only way you'll ever watch certain movies on your beautiful new TV set.

PC GAMING

The downside to PC gaming is that you have to play it on a small monitor in a computer chair. Sitting on the couch and playing Team Fortress 2 on your gorgeous plasma screen TV definitely reminds you of why you even bother upgrading your graphics card every year.

CONVENIENCE

The main reason for plugging your HDTV into your computer: Convenience. In fact, more than a few users keep a multimedia computer around for the express purpose of using it as an entertainment console. For example, the Mac Mini, while not the most powerful computer in terms of things like gaming, is nonetheless a very powerful little entertainment

console. You can get a lower-end Mac Mini and use it as a combination DVD player, music system, and Netflix-downloader, for a fraction of the cost of buying all the necessary components separately.

Really, it just comes down to this: It can be cheaper, it's more convenient, and there will be fewer wires to untangle every time you want to plug something in.

So, now that we've made our case, here's a quick and easy how-to guide for those of you who've never bothered plugging a computer into a TV before...

HDTV TO PC CONNECTIVITY: A HOW-TO

If you're still shopping for a new HDTV and you want to try this out, then just make sure that the TV you're getting has S-video cable support. There are other methods of hooking the two together, but the S-video route is the easiest, most convenient, and most headache-free route, and really, you don't need a how-to for that, as it's no more complicated than plugging your DVD player into the AV ports.

Now, if you've already got your HDTV, and if it does not have an S-video port, this is where it gets slightly trickier.

VGA

VGA is another method, and, hopefully, your PC and HDTV support it right off the bat. Try plugging the two together with a VGA cable. If it doesn't work, there may be one of two problems...

First, your computer might not be capable of sending VGA to your TV. If this is the case, you'll want to invest in a VGA card or VGA-to-component to allow it to export such signals to your TV.

Second, you might simply have resolution compatibility issues. Go into your computer's settings and make sure that you're setting video resolution for the same resolution as your HDTV screen.

DVI

Check your user manual for your signals for both the HDTV and your computer. Most likely, your computer is sending out DVI while your HDTV is set for HDMI. If this is the case, you'll want to get a DVI-to-HDMI converter. Don't worry, it's not too pricy, and it generally does the trick.

RESOLUTION ISSUES

In any event, you might still have compatibility issues with resolution. If this keeps happening, look up a software package called Powerstrip. Powerstrip should be able to get your signals from point A to point B with very little fuss and muss.

Now, if any of the above confuses you, just put it out of your mind for now. Wait until the time comes to actually hook the two up together. Then you'll be able to refer to this chapter again to find out what you need and how to use it.

7

VIDEO GAMES, DVD-R AND OTHER STUFF YOU DON'T NEED BUT MIGHT WANT

Let's say you're not a huge gamer. Maybe you haven't touched a Nintendo since the first Super Mario Brothers. If that's the case, then you probably haven't heard that video game systems are blurring the line more and more these days. Something like the Xbox 360, yeah, it plays video games, but that's not all it does. You can also use it to download movies from Netflix, watch episodes of your favorite TV shows, and send email to fellow fans.

As for the Playstation 3, remember in the chapter on Blu-Ray where we suggested that you don't bother with the format until the price goes down? Well the Playstation 3 plays Blu-Ray movies, and the price of the console was recently knocked down to three hundred. So if you're on the fence about Blu-Ray, and if you like video games, you can kill two birds with one stone.

What we're driving at in this chapter is that... well, let's say you've got your glorious HDTV, you've got your leather recliner, a nice sound system and a top of the line DVD player and now... you've got a couple hundred bucks left over on your entertainment budget.

So what to put that extra money towards? Well you can take your friends out to a nice steak dinner, take a weekend vacation out of town, or, you can buy an extra toy or two to add onto your home theater.

DVD-R

One of the reasons a lot of people were wary about switching from VCR to DVD players: You can't record DVDs!

Well, that used to be the case, when the equipment to record DVDs was prohibitively expensive. Nowadays, it's actually quite cheap. In fact, if your PC has a DVD burner built in, you might not even need to spend an extra dime to record DVDs so long as you have the equipment to connect your PC to your TV.

Now make no mistake, Tivo is great, but it's really only useful for watching your favorite show when you couldn't get home in time to check it out. As an archiving tool, it's not quite as useful as a DVD-R recorder.

If you're wondering what the point of recording television is in the internet era, where we have Hulu.com to watch any show we want, content on demand, and all our favorite cult TV hits of the eighties on DVD, well, the fact remains that there's a lot of stuff that's broadcast and never archived.

Take for instance the Star Wars Christmas Special. This cheesy presentation was never officially released on video or DVD, and in fact, most of the people involved in its production like to forget that it ever existed. However, it holds great interest for Star Wars fans partly because of its scarcity. Before the era of Youtube, the only way to watch it was to find a fellow geek who recorded it with his VCR when it aired, and ask him to make you a copy.

You never know when some odd thing will air once, and then never air again. Something like Chuck Wepner knocking Muhammed Ali down in round 9, a once-in-a-lifetime touchdown for the local team, or some TV special that winds up becoming a cult legend. If you're a serious fan, it can be nice to have that archived.

On the other hand, maybe you're a big online gamer, and you want to prove to everyone that you really did score a perfect win-streak against one of the top ranked clans on Gears of War 2. In any event, DVD-R can come in real handy for archiving those events that only happen once.

VIDEO GAMES

As we've said above, the modern video game system isn't so much a dedicated gaming console as it is a hybrid PC, gaming system, and general purpose entertainment center. Even if you don't know Halo from Half Life and the last game you touched was Donkey Kong, you can still pick up a used Xbox 360 for just over a hundred bucks to watch movies and TV and not regret the purchase.

On the other hand, if you are a serious gamer, then you'll want to keep in mind the one and only rule to keep in mind when shopping for a gaming system: Look at what games are available for what system, and pick up the system with the best games.

This is entirely subjective, of course. And the interesting thing about the current "console wars" is that Nintendo, Sony and Microsoft aren't really competing with one another so much as they've each found their own niche within the gaming industry, and have chosen to play to their own fan base rather than trying to compete with one another. Whatever your tastes in gaming, one console or the other should fit your needs perfectly.

Now, if you like online shooters, the Xbox 360 is probably your best bet, with games like Left 4 Dead and Halo 3, and one of the best online community networks for peer to peer gaming. Not to mention, a stellar online marketplace, where you can buy new add-ons for your current games, or download old classics like Sonic the Hedgehog and Gunstar Heroes.

On the other hand, if you're more into straightforward, quirky, fun action games, then you'd probably be more interested in the Nintendo Wii. Likewise, if you're just looking for something that can provide a few laughs when you have your buddies over, nothing beats knocking back a few beers and flailing your arms around with the Wii Sports series.

The Playstation 3 is the most technically impressive system of the lot. While it has fewer available games than the Xbox or the Wii, the games it does have are simply staggering in technical quality. Metal Gear Solid 4, for example, may well be the most mind numbingly realistic game to date in terms of graphics, sound and physics.

So if you're in the market for a new gaming system but haven't really been keeping up with the industry, here's how to select the one that's right for you: Go to a gaming store, find the most interesting looking games there, and pick the system that those games are for. Don't worry about the technical details, just focus on which games you think you can have the most fun with, because at the end of the day, if a game's not fun, then who cares how technically impressive it is?

VIDEO CAMERAS

These days, everyone who takes to the home video camera as a hobby generally holds their World Premieres on Youtube. That's all well and good, as you get to show your stuff to a worldwide audience, but for your own viewing pleasure, do you want to watch your nephew's little league game with the whole family crowding around a tiny little three inch screen on your computer monitor, or do you want to put that new TV to use and make a party out of it? It's a rhetorical question, obviously you'd rather lean back on your sofa than squint your eyes at a microscopic video screen.

The catch 22 here is that most consumer grade video cameras aren't really made to create high quality video that can be shown on HDTV. They're made, well, to create footage that looks great on a tiny Youtube window. For something that actually puts your HDTV to use, you'll probably need to spend a little extra.

So the question here is really along the lines of... how important is your video hobby to you? Is it just something you do for fun? Something you hope to make a career out of? Do you consider yourself an artist, or do you just like recording birthday parties and weddings for friends?

Whatever the case may be, that should determine how much money you're willing to spend on a great video camera.

The top-of-the-line "prosumer" model right now is still the Canon XL1. There are better cameras out there, more impressive cameras, but the Canon XL series is really considered the starting point for any serious video amateur. They usually go for anywhere from one to two thousand dollars new...

But used, they can easily be purchased for a few hundred bucks.

Our advice is to go ahead and check eBay, check craigslist, check out sales at camera stores, and see if you can score one on the cheap.

On the other hand, if you're happy with your Sony mini-DV camera and you're perfectly content to just put your stuff up on Youtube, then don't worry about it. At the end of the day, the only person you need to make happy is yourself (and that's really what this whole chapter is about).

8

TIVO, NETFLIX AND DIRECTV: GETTING GOOD ENTERTAINMENT CHEAP

There's a nostalgic charm to reminiscing on the old days of television. Twelve channels, bunny ears, your first color TV. There's a certain clunky, charming appeal to all that stuff, but let's get real here; the Twenty First Century has been very, very kind to entertainment geeks.

Here, today, in the digital information age, the high-speed internet era, all the entertainment you want is a click or two away, at your fingertips. You don't even need to use a VCR to record your favorite shows anymore, you can just download it on demand when you get home from work.

The best part is that none of this is really all that expensive. Netflix lets you rent an unlimited amount of movies for a low monthly fee, DirecTV gives you more entertainment than you could watch in one lifetime as part of the basic package, and on the internet, not only do you have sites like Hulu giving you everything you'd see on TV for free, but you also have the official websites for these shows letting you watch online.

Really, this entire chapter is almost superfluous, as you don't exactly need to be an expert to sign up for Netflix and have new movies sent directly to your computer. Rather than offering a "how-to" on anything here, we're just going to point you in the right direction. Here are some great entertainment services you probably won't want to miss out on...

HULU.COM

Certainly you've seen the TV commercials where Alec Baldwin or Seth MacFarlane reveal their sinister plan to take over the world with Hulu. Whether you find those commercials amusing or slightly annoying, the fact remains that Hulu's a pretty useful service for your inner couch potato.

Where Tivo allows you to record a show digitally and watch it later, Hulu simply keeps an archive of entire seasons of current and classic shows to be brought up on demand. Think of it as Youtube for people who like real television.

Hulu is primarily designed for the express purpose of watching TV on your computer. However, if you opt to hook your PC up to your HDTV, and if

you have a very good internet connection, Hulu may well be your primary source for new episodes of your favorite shows.

Now there are a few downsides. For one, Hulu does carry shows in high quality, but isn't always capable of giving as high of quality as simply watching these shows on digital cable. Secondly, if your internet connection isn't lightning fast, there can be noticeable skipping and freezing. And thirdly, most shows aren't put up on Hulu until a full day after they air. This isn't usually such a big deal, but if you like waking up with the Daily Show and going to bed right after Conan, you're going to be watching every episode a day late, and let's be honest, that sort of kills the punchline when the opening monologue is all about what was in the headlines two days ago.

TUNES

While put together by Apple, iTunes actually comes packed in with Windows nowadays. Again, if you want to hook your TV up to your PC, this is a great alternative to keeping stacks and stacks of CDs cluttering up your living room. You can use your TV to browse through your music collection and bring up any song, album or playlist you like with the click of a mouse. The sound quality you'll hear on an MP3 is, for all intents and purposes, roughly identical to what you'll hear on an actual CD.

Besides convenience, the real boon in using iTunes is the opportunity to listen to rare music that you might not be able to find at the local music shop.

Now to be completely frank, a vinyl record player is still the best sound quality you can find anywhere. Once the music has been reduced to ones and zeroes, no matter how many ones and zeroes they can fit into a single MP3 or CD, the fact is that it's digital information versus pure recording. But let's be honest, how practical is that? If you're a fan of any music released after 1990, good luck finding it on vinyl in the first place.

So, we're sure you're already using an iPod loaded with your favorite songs, so all we're saying is: Take that convenience, that accessibility, and imagine if you had that with a hi-def sound system, as opposed to a pair of cheap plastic earbuds.

MOVIE AND MUSIC TRADING COMMUNITIES

If you're a huge film or music buff, look around online for communities centered on cult, rare and out-of-print films and music.

We're not talking about illegal file trading here, since that's, for one thing, illegal, and for another thing, the stuff you can download illegally is stuff you could easily find in a store, anyways.

Rather, let's say you're a big fan of Martin Scorsese. A number of his early short films have never been given a commercial release, and the only way to find them is by seeking out a movie collector who has a copy.

Well, in the old days, before the internet, that would've been next to impossible. Today, however, you can find these collectors on the web.

No matter how many great films you've seen, how many great albums you own, there's always some great gem out there that you've never even heard of. If you want to expand your resources for getting hold of these scarcities, you can't do much better than mingling with other like minded collectors on the web and seeing what they can turn you on to.

DIRECTV

Let's cut to the chase here: DirecTV is essentially the current reigning champion of delivering great hi definition entertainment.

Boasting exclusive deals with various sporting leagues, delivering content on demand, and carrying hundreds of unique channels, all in hi-def, there's reason they're reaching more than eighteen million subscribers worldwide.

But really, you probably know all about DirecTV by now, and it might as well be your default, primary resource for entertainment content. We only bother mentioning it because this chapter would seem incomplete without it, and to suggest that, if you haven't switched over from the local cable provider yet, you may as well use your new home theater setup as an excuse to make the switch.

INTERNET RADIO AND PODCASTS

We're not just talking about those America Online stations that play the same twelve songs back to back. Rather, we're talking about online radio stations and podcasts that are run by serious music fans who want to share their collection with the world.

The way radio is run these days, there really aren't many actual disc jockeys left. For the most part, radio stations are automated to play certain songs on repeat for awhile, broken up by commercials. Internet radio has provided a return-to-form for the old days of radio personalities like Wolfman Jack and even Doctor Demento.

With internet radio and podcasting, you can easily find radio shows and programming tuned in to your personal listening tastes. It doesn't cost much to set up a virtual radio station, so there's nothing holding fans back from creating exactly the sort of programming they want to hear.

YOUTUBE

Okay, yeah, it seems kind of silly to suggest you watch Youtube on your 1080p big screen HDTV with surround sound, but since being bought by Google, Youtube has been doing some interesting things.

First, Youtube is offering high-quality video options now, so if you have the bandwidth, you can upload and view videos that are every bit as hi-def as a shiny new DVD. This means that, when you play such a video on your HDTV, it won't look so crummy, but rather, it will actually put your new TV to good use.

Secondly, many entertainment groups like Fox and Universal Music are now making deals with Youtube to air music videos, TV shows, and internet exclusive special presentations via their service. This means that, as with Hulu, you can enjoy new content on demand and for free.

Third, there's a lot of interesting stuff on Youtube that you can't find anywhere else. There are those great viral videos like "Where in the Hell is Matt?" wherein the video maker records himself dancing in various locations around the world, showing the beauty of our planet, and with a sense of humor. And of course, maybe you have a video blogger you like following, or there are some tutorial videos you might find useful.

The point is that Youtube largely caters to an amateur set, people who might have great ideas, but without the means to get their work shown on television or picked up by a major entertainment company. A lot of this stuff, while it might not have mass appeal to reach out to a broader audience, is actually much more interesting than the same old stuff you could watch on any TV station in the world, simply because these amateur video makers are able to take the sort of risks, to run with the offbeat ideas, that you simply can't afford to take a chance on when you have to consider making a production studio happy.

GETTING WHAT YOU WANT

Here's what we're trying to get across with this chapter: It's the Twenty First Century, the era of high speed internet. Anything you want to watch, anything you want to listen to, it's just a few mouse clicks away.

We've discussed Blu-Ray above, but in the grand scheme of things, chances are that Blu-Ray is the last in the long tradition of going to the store to buy a movie. Music has already made the transition, with the majority of revenue being made these days coming from online sales as opposed to CD sales. Video games are going that way, too, with more and more games being downloaded directly to the video game system as opposed to bought in the store. It won't be long before movies and television are distributed one hundred percent digitally.

The total conversion from brick-and-mortar entertainment shopping to a completely online marketplace is still perhaps a few years away, but in the meantime, take advantage of the convenience and affordability that this new market provides, even in its infancy. Not only that, but there's content available on the internet that you just can't find elsewhere. Stuff that's maybe too risqué, too rare, too niche, or just plain too weird to ever land a spot on national television. Take advantage, and see if you can find something great.

9

WHERE TO BUY AND WHAT TO BUY (NOW THAT YOU KNOW WHAT YOU WANT)

We've mentioned eBay and craigslist a few times in the above chapters, and for good reason!

It comes down to a simple matter of commerce. An electronics store has to make a profit to stay in business. They buy products at wholesale and mark them up for retail. They have to pay for the product itself, they have to keep their employees fed, they have to maintain a store, they have to advertise and on and on.

When people are buying directly from one another, there's no overhead. One individual can afford to sell their old TV to another for whatever price they can both be comfortable with. The people selling in these classifieds and auction sites are usually not so much running a business as they just have a few things they want to get rid of, so they typically sell for a much lower price than you'd pay retail.

You may have to make a sacrifice in overall choice, since you'll have to buy based on what's available as opposed to what's top-of-the-line, but what's available can be very nice indeed.

And of course, if you can't find what you're looking for there, you can always just truck it on over to the electronics store and see what they have to offer, keeping an eye out for sales and bargains.

Now, that said, you don't want to just buy whatever you can get for cheap. You should know what you're looking for, and you should know which products come highly recommended, and which you can safely forget about.

So with that in mind, here's what you'll want to do to make sure you're shopping smart...

READ A LOT OF USER REVIEWS

The internet is absolutely loaded with honest, thorough user reviews for electronics. Call it the tech-geek in all of us. When we get a fancy new DVD player, we want to brag about it, and when we get a bum deal, we want everyone to know to stay far away from Brand X.

So this is just another area where the geeks really come through for us: Honest, thorough, detailed reviews, written in plain terms, and not tech babble.

CHECK THE MESSAGE BOARDS

As great as these user reviews are, nothing beats talking tech with some fellow entertainment lovers. Look for some online forums dedicated to discussing home entertainment products and get involved.

Ask about products you might have your eye on, look for recommendations, and keep an open mind. You never know, someone might turn you on to a product you hadn't even thought of before, but which is just perfect for what you're going for.

ELECTRONICS STORES

We've emphasized alternative routes to just shopping at the local electronics stores, but we don't mean to put these shops down. Rather, many consumers simply don't look beyond the local Best Buy, and we're only trying to remind our readers that, hey, there are other options out there.

That said, there are some great deals at department stores and entertainment stores. Besides which, you can also find well-informed, fully qualified, self-proclaimed geeks at these places that can help guide you to exactly what you're looking for.

The only downside to this more traditional route is really just that you have to wait on a sale in order to get a great deal. However, that's not such a big deal, since most electronics stores are holding a huge sale every other weekend. The technology keeps advancing, and it's only advancing faster every day, so it's always easy to find last year's model at half price.

10

STAYING OUT OF DEBT: GETTING THE PERFECT SETUP WITHOUT LIVING BEYOND YOUR MEANS

We've already dedicated a chapter to setting your budget. This chapter is about sticking to it.

In the excitement of setting up your home theater, it can be all too easy to get carried away. Maybe you can cover that gorgeous flat screen at \$500, but then you think, why not the even flatter, even more gorgeous TV for a grand?

Resist the temptation to spend outside of your budget. You set that budget for a reason, and a very good one, at that: This is as much as you can safely spend on your home theater setup, and not a penny more.

Let's be frank: We're dealing with a recession right now. The last thing you want is to be a few grand in debt just so you can watch the Superbowl on a huge TV.

Now, again, if you're rich, do what you like. But if, like most of us, you're just trying to live an okay lifestyle in a tough economy, then you need to be careful about how much you're spending, and how you're spending.

USING CREDIT CARDS

Let's be blunt here: You might want to stay away from credit cards.

Credit cards will lure you into a false sense of security. How many people do you know, just going off the top of your head, who have been smacked with huge debt because of credit cards? It's a safe bet that most of them got into that mess in the first place by doing exactly what you're doing right now, setting up a home theater.

Learn from everyone else's mistake here. If possible, pay for everything in cash. Again, we're not talking about a car or a home, we're talking about an entertainment center. Okay, we'll be the first to admit that some form of recreation, some sort of entertainment, is a necessity. It's what keeps you sane, it's what keeps you going with the daily grind, but if a TV that's

within your budget will do the job, then there's no reason to apply for another credit card and start spending money that you don't have.

On the other hand, if you have the money to cover the credit card bill, if, in fact, you don't even need to use the credit card, then go ahead and use the credit card. Paying off a home theater on time can't do anything but improve your credit score.

CONCLUSION

Now, if we've done our job, you should know everything you need to know about setting up your home theater: What to buy, where to buy it, how to get a good deal, and how to do it all without breaking the bank.

One more piece of advice, though, and this is the most important point to make: Don't treat this e-Book as some sort of Bible for setting up your home theater. If your idea for a home theater is to just take the TV you have now, hook it up to a nice sound system, and set up a few rows of red chairs for the movie-theater-at-home experience, do it. If you could care less about sound quality and would rather spend your whole home theater budget on the biggest, prettiest HDTV you can find, do it. The bottom line is that it's your hard earned money you're spending here, and it's your viewing experience.

The only thing that matters at the end of the day is whether or not you're happy with your home theater setup. That's all. Hopefully, this e-Book will help you find exactly what you're looking for to get that perfect viewing experience, but we can't tell you what that viewing experience should be. That's up to you.