

Sunday, December 16, 2007

New toys: iMac and Sonos

A couple of early Christmas presents for the new house. A new iMac for the kitchen nook and a Sonos system. I guess I haven't bought ram in a while because it was under \$100 to upgrade the iMac to 4G with ram from OWC. The iMac is a perfect fit for the kitchen. The black and aluminum matches the counters and appliances in the kitchen nicely.

I had been eyeing a Mac Mini for ages, but Apple doesn't seem very interested in the Mini and for the price the iMac seemed like a much better deal. Bought it from Amazon and it didn't come with Leopard but Apple has an update program so the upgrade is mostly free. They want \$10 for shipping me the CD. I already have another copy, so it would be nice if they would just give me a serial number.

As nice as the iMac is, the Sonos system is more interesting. I have had various mechanisms for playing music from computers to decent speakers over the years, but they were all inconvenient hacks. I don't want to have to use a computer to control the music, and I definitely don't want to do it via a clunky TV-based interface either. The Sonos with its controller does a great job of taking the hack out of the system. It is basically a wireless meshing modular music system. You put either an amplified box with speakers connected, or an unamplified box connected to an existing stereo in each room and the single controller can then control each zone individually or you can link them all up so all the zones play the same music. Each box also has a Line-In that can be used as a source and played in any other zone

I wanted the iMac to be able to go to sleep without killing the music, so I used a 250G Simpleshare drive I had sitting around. One of these days I need to figure out a real NAS system for the house, but for now 250G is plenty as a Sonos media source. I pointed iTunes at the Simpleshare and copied all the music to the drive, then I pointed the Sonos system at the drive as well and it worked nicely.

Internet radio streaming, Rhapsody and Pandora are all working very nicely. I realize this turned out to be a bit of a boring post since there were no technical hurdles and thus no interesting hacks involved in getting any of this working. But that is afterall why people buy things like iMacs and Sonos systems. If they didn't just work without days of fiddling there are plenty of cheaper options that will let you hack and fiddle for months and in the end you get something that almost sorta mostly works.

Posted by Rasmus in Audio/Video at 09:08

Friday, August 18, 2006

Nike+iPod Goodness

On a whim I picked up the Nike+iPod doodad the other day and this morning did my first decent run with it and I am quite impressed. I'm not much of an Apple nor Nike fan. I do have a Powerbook, but doubt I would buy another one (see previous Toys entry), but this little device is definitely cool. It is going to make me run further and faster and at a more consistent pace. If you already have a Nano you really should pick one up. It's only \$29, \$27 if you work somewhere where you get the Employee discount. Even if you aren't a runner, this works perfectly well for walking as well. Even if you don't have a Nano, you can pick one up for \$108 in the refurbished section of the Apple store right now. Refurbished Apple items seem to be indistinguishable from new items in my experience.

It comes as two tiny devices. Doodad1 and Doodad2. Doodad1 you attach to your Nano as pictured on the right. It only comes in white so it doesn't match my black Nano all that well. Not that I care. Doodad2 you attach securely to your shoe. It should be on tightly such that it moves with your foot and doesn't dangle in a pouch or something. You can of course buy the \$100 Nike+ shoes which I am sure is the goal of this, but I find it works perfectly well stuffed under my sock on top of my foot with the laces tight below and above it. I don't feel it and it seems to be very accurate measuring distances. It uses some sort of piezoelectric accelerometer, like in a speaker, to measure the amount of time your foot spends on the ground combined with the time between foot strikes to figure out how fast and how far you are running. After I calibrated mine over a 1 mile distance it seems to be very accurate. I tried running 400 meters with long strides and then the same 400m with short strides and it didn't get confused. Walking the same 400m it managed to measure accurately as well. EEtimes had a good article on it.

The guts of the Doodads look like the image below.

While you are running the screen shows your progress. Distance, pace and time. If you hit the center button it will use either a male or a female voice to tell you the same information so you don't need to look at your screen. If you choose a set distance for your workout it will tell you that you are "halfway", "400 meters to go", "300 meters to go"... I thought it was interesting that it used meters even though I have mine set to give me everything in miles. I go both ways on the miles/meters thing so I don't care, but I could see someone being confused by that. When you finish your workout and you have beaten your previous best time or distance record you get a little congratulatory voice by Lance Armstrong or a couple of others, I think. I have only gotten Lance so far.

You then plug your iPod back into your computer and it uploads (if you let it) your workout to the Nike+ site. This site has a very nice Flash app (for some definition of nice tempered by the fact that it is Flash) which keeps track of your runs. It's a very shiny app that shows each individual run with time, distance, pace and calories burned (you enter your weight during setup).

The yellow line shows your speed during a run. The dots along the run there appear to be the times I pressed the center button to hear my progress. When you mouse over them in the app you see the distance and pace at that point. The speed seems to match my mental state and the hills along the run pretty well. And I find it really nice to be able to quickly check if I am falling behind the pace I know I can run. It is too easy to trick yourself into believing you are running at your optimal pace.

There is an overview screen where you see your runs. I have only done 2 so far. A short 1 mile run to check the calibration and then this morning's 10km run. When you mouse over the bars it gives you the details on each run.

And there is a summary screen showing your farthest run, best 1mi, 5km and 10km runs.

There are also ways to set goals and to create groups where I assume you can see other peoples' runs and motivate each other to run more that way. I don't know anybody else with one of these yet, so I haven't played with that feature. Perhaps we need to set up a running group for fat grumpy open source developers. It might help turn us into just grumpy open source developers. My wife showed an immediate interest in it as well, but it doesn't support multiple

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profiles on the same sensor. You can however have multiple sensors and share the same iPod, so I already ordered another \$27 sensor for her.

Posted by Rasmus in Audio/Video at 09:25

Friday, February 11. 2005

TiVo ToGo Annoyances

I put in my request weeks ago to get onto the priority list to get the new TivoToGo-enabled software on my Tivos. It finally arrived a couple of days ago. I wanted to write something up on it as soon as possible, but unfortunately it has taken me 3 days to get anywhere with it, and I still don't have a DVD with my shows on it. There were a number of problems.

The Tivo needed a reboot before it would work and since it was in the middle of recording something I didn't want to reboot it. That meant I couldn't do it the first night.

After a reboot the Tivo Desktop software was able to connect to my Tivo. Unfortunately it takes close to an infinite amount of time to transfer stuff. I have 7 episodes of "24" recorded at best quality I want to put on a DVD. That translates to about 15G of data I needed to transfer. I have a USB wired adapter plugged into a WRT54G and then an 802.11g connection to another WRT54G sitting next to a Windows box. This combination got me a transfer rate of about 1G/hour which means transferring my 7 episodes took over 15 hours.

Ok, a day later all the episodes came across. I grabbed the trial copy of Sonic MyDVD Studio 6.1 which is what Tivo suggests we use to create our dvds. I had configured my TiVo Desktop to stick my shows on E:\tivo since I didn't have room on my C drive. Unfortunately there is no provision in MyDVD to change the directory it looks for tv shows in. You can browse to the files and add them manually, but then you don't get the same ui screen that shows which shows are available. A quick register hack fixed that, but you can't expect Joe User to hack his registry for something this simple.

The MyDVD UI for adding shows is horrible. It doesn't show the episode information at all, so I had my list of 7 episodes all titled "24" with no clue as to which was which. So you are probably better off browsing to them and adding them manually than using the button designed for this.

MyDVD has absolutely no TiVo integration. I am sure that I read at some point that the dvds you create would have a Tivo-like navigation menu. No such thing exists in MyDVD. There isn't even a TiVo theme for the top DVD menu. They could at least have added a JPG with a TiVo logo or something. Nothing.

When I finally did start the burn process MyDVD told me it was building the menus. I had read it was slow, so I went to bed. 7 hours later it was still building the menus. So I left it another 12 hours. No progress. The thing isn't hung. There is a cancel button that works fine and asks me if I am sure I want to cancel since cancelling could take a "long" time!

So as far as I can tell burning a DVD simply isn't working for me. Who knows what the problem may be. Conflict with something else that is installed perhaps? This is Windows, you can never really be sure why something doesn't work. Unfortunately the OSX TiVo Desktop 2.0 is not available yet so I can't do this on my Powerbook yet. At this point it looks like my only real option is to work around MyDVD and use something like this hack to convert the .tivo files to mpeg2. In the long run that's probably much more useful anyway. The .tivo files have a playback password on them you have to remember which seems to me to be DRM run amok. Not that I have a VCR, but if I did, it wouldn't have a password option. This is no different.

Another annoying thing is that the recorded shows have a thin strip of white on black noise at the top. Looks to be too organized to be noise actually. Closed captioning data or something? Guess I may need to edit the stream to cut that out and also to snip out the commercials so I can fit more on a dvd.

I'll update this if I ever get my shows onto a dvd that works. At this point I am having a hard time disagreeing with the TiVo Deathwatch. I'll probably be looking for an alternative soon.

Update: Ok, I finally managed to burn a working DVD from the MyDVD software. After a ctrl-alt-del to kill off the running process that had been going for almost 24 hours, I restarted it, reloaded the project and it actually worked. Still took a couple of hours to sit and chew on the 2 .tivo files I had fed it, but the final DVD works. It still has the noise at the top which is distracting, but the quality is ok. So all in all, out of the 8 hours of "24" which was supposed to be my test case, eliminating the hung MyDVD and other delays and extrapolating from the 3 hours I have managed to burn so far, it will

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end up taking somewhere between 20 and 24 hours to create the 3 DVDs assuming I am right there at each user-interaction point ready to click or switch dvds and assuming no hung processes or crashes. I think the upper range my patience will tolerate is 8 hours to burn 8 hours of content. For it to be something I would use often it would need to be at least 3x or 4x, as in 15-20 minutes for every hour of content.

By the way, don't get me wrong, I love my TiVo. I have played a little bit with alternatives, and for the core functionality of scheduling and recording shows nothing I have seen beats it. But the alternatives are catching up and my expectations are high.

Posted by Rasmus in Audio/Video at 14:32

Saturday, January 29, 2005

Synching iTunes with rsync

I have an XP box that acts mostly as a uPNP media server for the Philips Streamium and also serves as the server for digital cameras and the other mp3 players. However, since getting the Powerbook and now the iShuffle I have been using iTunes on my Powerbook to manage my mp3's. So the problem was that I wanted to be able to easily update my XP box with the iTunes music library from my Powerbook and let Christine update her iRiver player from it. With the Windows version of iTunes installed and the UMS firmware for Christine's iRiver 390T it is easy to use iTunes to populate the iRiver. The tricky part was synchronizing the libraries including the ratings and play counts. I marked my Windows iTunes folder as shared along with my music folder. I have these on separate drives. If your music folder is in your iTunes directory you could simplify this script a bit:

No iframe support? You can see the code at <http://lerdorf.com/synci.phps>

When you run this it makes your Windows iTunes look exactly like your OSX iTunes by mounting the Windows shares, copying over the hdfm file, munging the paths in the XML file and rsyncing the music folder which means you will lose any library properties local to your Windows box. I would also suggest exiting iTunes on both machines before running this script and synching your clocks from an ntp server. The clock on my XP box drifts badly so I had to add --modify-window to the rsync command.

It should be simple to reverse the script if you want your Windows iTunes to be the master, and with a bit of work you could probably make it go in both directions. But this serves my needs nicely.

Posted by Rasmus in Audio/Video at 10:50

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Wednesday, January 26, 2005

iShuffle

A 1G iShuffle showed up today. Carl instantly took to it and at one point declared, "I like it." So if nothing else, Apple has managed to design something that appeals to a 2-year old.

Much has been written about the lack of a screen on this thing and how it is just a USB memory stick with an earphone plug. While that is pretty much true, it is also priced in the ballpark of dumb memory sticks so I am not sure why people complain so much about that. My main use for an mp3 player is during my runs. I tend to run without my glasses so looking at any sort of display while running is out of the question. I have enough trouble picking out cars without my glasses, never mind a tiny lcd display. When I am stationary I turn to my surgically attached laptop which is a perfectly good mp3 player by itself, but running with a laptop with its hard drive spinning would be insane and as far as I am concerned the same applies to running with a hard drive based player. I have already destroyed one HD player by doing that.

We have two other flash players in the household, both of them with screens, and I never look at them. Flash players are not designed to hold your entire music collection. You have that somewhere else and you just load up stuff you want to listen to for a certain activity. Our other flash players have been stuck in random-play mode for years so it was as if Apple designed a player that catered specifically to the way I use them.

Christine has an iRiver which is a great flash player. But they are a tad pricy, and we already have one of those. No fun buying 2 of the same toys. I also have a rather crappy RAVE-MP AMP-256 flash player I picked up from Walmart for under \$50 a while back. It does its job, sort of, but the single AAA battery vs. the AA in the iRiver is annoying, and often it won't start unless I pull the battery and re-insert it. Some sort of firmware bug that they have been promising a fix for. The volume is too low on it and the whole thing feels flimsy, so I am not a huge fan. Then again, for under \$50 it's not a bad deal and if they ever come out with that firmware update that fixes the boot and volume problems, and also allowing you to put more than a 512M add-on SD card in it, then it would be a steal at that price. For now I only see myself using it for its radio and voice recording if I can't steal Christine's iRiver which is better at both.

Anyway, back to the iShuffle. There really isn't that much to say about it. You plug it in, iTunes launches automatically (on both OSX and XP) and you either randomly autofill it or you drag songs onto it. Or you do a combination. The volume is good. It weighs nothing. The controls rival the iRiver stick and are easy to operate with one hand unlike the AMP256 which is impossible to control both tracks and volume with one hand unless you have a triple-jointed thumb. One thing that did annoy me was the fact that it doesn't want to connect to 2 different iTunes. I loaded it up on my Powerbook and then plugged it into an XP box to put a few songs on it that was only on that machine and it asked me if I wanted to tie it to this iTunes instead. I understand why this is so from a legal perspective, but given how trivial this restriction is to work around it is one of those things that is just irritating. Also, when I said no it simply wasn't visible, and it isn't showing up as a regular USB mass storage device after that either. If you don't launch iTunes it appears nicely as a usb mass storage device and you can use it like a regular memory stick. I also really like the built-in USB plug and the fact that it recharges through it. The other two flash players in the household can easily go 6 months between music updates because it is a hassle to find the usb cable and hook it up. With the iShuffle recharging and updating the music on it is a single seamless operation. And with Autofill it is just a single click. The other unique feature I haven't seen mentioned much is the option in iTunes to automatically convert to 128kbps AAC for anything you transfer to it to squeeze more tracks onto it.

Perhaps related to that automatic down-conversion feature, it seems like there may be a bug in iTunes. For example right now it is reporting this:

So which is it? Have I used 984M or 782M? I assume there isn't 200M of overhead hiding in there. I get an out-of-space error when trying to add more tracks at this point, yet they still seem to show up and the 782 number goes up while the 984 stays the same. Unplugging it and restarting iTunes doesn't change anything. I did have a number of large .WAV files that I put on there and then converted them to 128kbps AAC once they were already on there. iTunes is telling me they were converted, but it seems like the fact that the file sizes changed on files already on the player isn't being taken into account somewhere.

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My final verdict is that this is a cool cheap little player for people like me who can't justify paying \$400 for an mp3 player. The iPod mini is definitely an option here for more features and storage, but there is still a hard drive which won't be happy with my vigorous stomping when I run and up in that pricerange there are other options with built-in radios that seem just as appealing. Since I already have two flash players with radios and the ability to record, I didn't really care about these features, but if you aren't a gadget-collecting geek and just want one and don't mind spending a little bit more I would suggest one of the iRiver flash players. Of course you don't get native iTunes integration with a non-iPod which might be a consideration. All in all I am using the shuffle for my runs now in place of the AMP256 because of its higher capacity and seamless charging/updating and because Christine has claimed the iRiver and won't let me steal it.

Posted by Rasmus in Audio/Video at 23:05

Saturday, December 4, 2004

Philips Streamium SL300i

I seem to have this magic \$200 pricepoint barrier below which I buy anything that I can give an IP address on my LAN. A \$50 Philips discount plus a corporate partnership discount brought it under \$200 for me. It bugged me that my Linksys Media Appliance box only does Audio and Images and even though it has network support it doesn't make use of that to talk to the Internet in any way. Philips has thought things through a bit better. The Streamium can be used in 2 modes. They call it Internet and PC-Link. In PC-Link mode it is similar to the Linksys in that it uses Intel's UPnP Media Server protocol to fetch content from a local server and in Internet mode it connects to a number of online content services including Yahoo, Radio Free Virgin, Playhouse Radio, Andante and many others. You can also feed it your own streaming sources. Note though that it doesn't support WMA nor ASF so it can't stream from a number of Windows-centric streaming services.

It has both a 10/100 port and 802.11g support. I already have a WRT54G sitting on top of my TV so I just plugged it into that, but I did try the wireless config and it worked easily. Plugged in my WEP key and off it went. The Philips Media Manager software that comes with it is however horrible. It is this big Java monstrosity that chews up a whack of RAM and as far as I can tell only runs on Windows. Go figure. Luckily Philips didn't restrict the Streamium to their own media manager. You can install any UPnP media server you want. I prefer a little tiny one called TwonkyVision. It doesn't have a GUI but instead takes the sane approach and has a web interface. And it isn't written in Java so it is portable(!?) It runs well on OSX, Linux and Windows.

The TV interface seems a little clunky to me. It is somewhat hard to navigate and it seems to flicker a bit. I don't think it is me or the TV because the TiVo onscreen interface is rock-solid without any flicker at all. The online part of this at my.philips.com is also not great. It's not bad, but it seems like they could do a lot more with it. That's where you go to configure what the Internet portion of the device should connect to. I like the fact that no local machine needs to be available to use or configure the Internet side of it. Just go to the web site and choose which streams, video and photo services to use. Hook this thing up to an LCD hanging on a wall and configure it to show your Yahoo Photos or galleries from Lex Fletcher's Born to Shoot site and you have a pretty nice dynamic picture frame.

Prodding it just a little bit shows the following:

```
PORT STATE SERVICE
80/tcp open http
1720/tcp filtered H.323/Q.931
8080/tcp open http-proxy
```

And the web server returns:

```
200 OK
Cache-Control: no-cache
Connection: close
Server: Allegro-Software-RomPager/4.30
Content-Type: text/xml
Expires: Thu, 26 Oct 1995 00:00:00 GMT
Client-Date: Sat, 04 Dec 2004 16:11:14 GMT
Client-Peer: 192.168.1.106:80
Client-Response-Num: 1
```

followed by a bunch of XML which looks like a normal UPnP Media response. Interestingly enough it looks like other devices can use this one as their UPnP Media source. I am sure that is in the spec somewhere, but I never realized that

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before that these things could be used as media relays.

All in all it is a cool little device.

Posted by Rasmus in Audio/Video at 07:05

Sunday, March 14, 2004

Buying a new DVD player

Carl managed to break our old Sony DVD player which of course meant I got to buy a new toy. I was very tempted by the Gateway Networked DVD Player and the new LiteOn LVD-2010 which is also a networked player. Being able to stream things to the player skipping the middle step of having to burn to DVD first is attractive, and of course, why would you buy any powered device without a NIC? Every device should have an IP, no matter how inappropriate. However, I played a bit with the Gateway player and the menus seemed clunky and the number of formats it could play natively was limited. If the machine you are streaming from has enough juice you can transcode from a large number of formats on the fly, but for some reason I still wasn't sold on it. And the LiteOn doesn't seem readily available yet. I couldn't find it anywhere. So instead I picked up a Philips DVD727 for \$79 from Fry's. It is a slick little progressive scan player (not that I have a TV capable of that yet) with S-Video, component and optical outputs on the back. The menus are simple and making it region-free was trivial. Open tray, 9 9 9 0 (slowly), close tray. I tested it with a Danish region 2 PAL DVD and it played perfectly. Unlike many other players you can make region-free, this one you can set to any region, so if you have any region-locked dvds that won't play in region 0 you can set it explicitly to the appropriate region. The next test was to see how well it handled a DVD+R data disc. I grabbed some 3500 photos of Carl, 30 videos of various AVI, WMV and MPEG formats and a couple of hundred mp3s and stuck them in Photos/, Videos/ and Music/ directories on a regular data dvd and popped it into the player. It came up with a nice little directory of what was on the DVD. It was only able to show the first 650 jpegs in my Photos directory. The manual says there is a limit of 500 files per directory. So it looks like I will have to spread my 3500 pictures out over many sub-directories. Annoying, but not a big deal. The mp3 playback is nice. It has playlists and even a shuffle mode. You can also start the mp3s playing and switch over to the jpeg slideshow and have them both going at the same time. For the videos it was only able to play the mpeg files. No AVI nor WMV support apparently. But it still leaves our previous Sony player in the dust by not needing to do full DVD authoring which takes forever. Being able to browse your backup DVDs in your DVD player is very nice. This player also supports SVCD and regular CD-R of course.

Posted by Rasmus in Audio/Video at 23:15

Saturday, November 8, 2003

Our current mp3 players

I like this little iRiver 256M flash player. Small and light and great for running. Not very hackable though. The latest firmware does let you manage it like normal removable flash storage so you can use it easily from Linux or on Windows without any special software.

[TechTV Review](#)

[Firmware upgrade info](#)

The Archos harddrive players are getting a bit dated, but that also means they are cheap. I picked up a 10G Studio player for \$85 a while back. It only has USB1.1 and a tiny 2-line display which makes it nearly impossible to navigate your songs, but I just stick it on random and let it do its thing. The best part about it is that it is very hackable. Check out the open source RockBox firmware for it:

[Update March 10, 2004] The Archos hard drive won't spin up anymore. Guess it took a few too many beatings coming with me on all my runs. Waiting to see if anything interesting comes out soon to replace it.

Posted by Rasmus in [Audio/Video](#) at 02:03