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Vying for Remote Control

Companies Scramble for a Niche as Computers and Televisions Merge

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The race is on to merge the two most powerful entertainment boxes in the home.

The marriage of the television and the computer moved a step closer yesterday when the giant chipmaker Intel Corp. unveiled its vision for using a new technology that blends the two devices. Intel said it is working with more than 40 companies around the world in the movie, music, television, gaming and photo-editing fields to deliver content to computers using the technology called Viiv (rhymes with five).

Due out early next year, Viiv-equipped computers are designed to control the overall entertainment experience. They turn a television into a computer screen with the capability of performing any computer task, including searching the Internet. Operated by remote control, the system will be able to show a movie on the television while downloading music for later listening. The computer will turn on instantly like a television and with an add-on feature will record, pause and rewind live television programs. An entertainment center operated by a Viiv-platform computer will be able to connect to

other devices, such as DVD players and portable media players.

Yesterday's announcement intensifies the competition among cable companies, game makers, computer manufacturers, software firms, retailers, entertainment giants and Internet search engines that are all scrambling to find a way to dominate -- or at least carve out a niche in -- the digital home-entertainment hub. Companies have hurried to form alliances to strengthen their positions.

"It's an epic battle," said Ted Schadler, consumer-technology analyst at Forrester Research Inc. "There are a lot of companies from a lot of industries who are trying to figure out where the power is and where the choke points are."

Some companies are banking on the set-top box monopolizing the family entertainment hub. The digital-recording company TiVo Inc., recognizing the role of the Internet in the future of television viewing, recently teamed with Yahoo Inc. to allow customers to program their devices through the Yahoo Web site. The deal opens up wider applications for Yahoo, which plans to deliver some content to televisions through TiVo by the end of the year.

Cisco Systems Inc., the huge Internet networking company, recently agreed to buy Scientific-Atlanta Inc., a maker of set-top boxes, making a clear play to deliver programming to televisions through the Internet.

Google Inc. also has ambitions to apply its formidable searching capability to the family entertainment center. CBS said recently that it was in talks with Google about video on demand and video searching.

Other companies think the computer will run this show. Since 2002, PCs running Microsoft's Media Center Edition of Windows XP have incorporated TV tuners and TV-recording software, as well as a "10-foot interface" designed to allow users to play music, view photos and watch video from a couch across the room instead of a chair in front of the screen. Microsoft says it has sold more than 4 million copies of Media Center Edition.

Apple Computer Inc. has taken a step toward turning its latest iMac into a television-like screening site but stopped short of providing the capability to send content to a real television screen. The new version contains an application called Front Row, which, operated by remote, clears the screen to view video and other content. The computer provides a large, open surface and easy remote navigation for viewing from a distance, but the content is still locked in the iMac.

Consumers have demonstrated a growing appetite for on-demand programming, and the digital trend promises to give them more control over what they watch and when they watch it. But as on-demand options expand via the Internet, viewers could become intimidated by the complexity of finding and downloading shows as well as connecting other devices to the system.

"It will take some time for people to make the transition unless you can make it very easy -- and if Intel

can do that, then that's a big thing," said Albert Cheng, executive vice president of digital media for the Disney-ABC Television Group. He added that, should consumers demonstrate a strong appetite for downloading Internet programming, Disney-ABC will be prepared to provide it. "If consumers find their way to the Internet, you can rest assured we are definitely working to ensure our content gets to consumers in all different ways."

Intel insists the Viiv-platform computers will be easy to use. Spokeswoman Kari Skoog said the company has sought to impress upon all of its content providers that simplicity is key in the product's development. She said the computers' set-up won't be much different from what is currently required and that next year, software will be available to smooth the process of adding new devices to the network.

Phil Leigh, a senior analyst at market-research firm Inside Digital Media, said he thinks he will one day be able to search online for a movie and click to play it on his television. The next generation, he said, will not remember that networks or cable operators once controlled consumers' viewing habits.

"Your children are going to look at you and say: 'Dad, you mean you had to watch what was on TV? You couldn't just go to Google and search what you wanted?' " he said. "This is exactly where we need to head."

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