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Comcast rolls out video on demand

On the one side of the massive, humming, "head-end" computer center in White Marsh, Md., where Comcast broadcasts its signal to 280,000 customers in the Baltimore suburbs, there's a small room lined with wall-to-wall monitors, set-top boxes and other gadgets that are the future of cable television. In one corner, you can flick a remote control and download the latest headlines. From the Internet, check out the movie schedule at the movies down the road or browse the menus at local restaurants, all on regular television set-top boxes.



ON COMPUTERS Michael Himmelfarb

In another corner, there's a kiddier set-top cable box that automatically records your favorite shows on an 80-gigabyte hard drive and plays them back whenever you want. It also allows a picture-in-picture display on any set, so you can watch two shows simultaneously while it records a third. Unfortunately, it tends to crash and reset itself all too often. Getting this stuff ready for prime time is the job of Tom Williams, an intense but affable engineer who serves as Comcast's director of technology here and runs the cable plant's new national test facility for advanced technology.

Comcast rolled out its first interactive product, Video on Demand, or VOD, which allows customers with digital cable service to order movies with their set-top boxes and play them whenever they like for a 24-hour period. Unlike pay-per-view, VOD lets viewers pause, rewind and play back a movie in progress.

The cable industry likes this model because it controls the content and the potential to charge customers for new services. In fact, the industry would like to extend VOD to regular broadcast schedule on a subscription basis.

The benefits are obvious — one other income stream for the cable company and flexibility for customers. If you like to watch the 6 o'clock news but don't get home till 7, all you have to do is flick your remote control when you arrive. There are a couple of major hurdles, however. One is the broadcast and entertainment industries. They own the programming and want their piece of the action, too. They're also concerned with digital piracy, particularly in Philadelphia with NBC's full broadcast schedule (programs are available for at least 24 hours after broadcast). But it may be a while before

it's available on a wide scale. The set-top video recorder is an other business, one that the cable industry doesn't like as much for two reasons. It doesn't control the content, and it requires a more expensive set-top box. For operators, it also detests the juggling of the commercial-advertising thing again. Two such devices, TiVo and SoLoMo, are already available as third-party home-

Microsoft's deal up WebTV system — harvested with massive indifference. But cable companies hope to have more luck with their high-speed access. Although it expects to deploy the service within a year, Comcast hasn't set a firm rollout date or pricing for Internet on TV. For now, the service is too slow and clunky — partly the result of limited capacity in the company's digital cable boxes. But stay tuned. Michael Himmelfarb is electronic news editor of The Baltimore Sun.

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