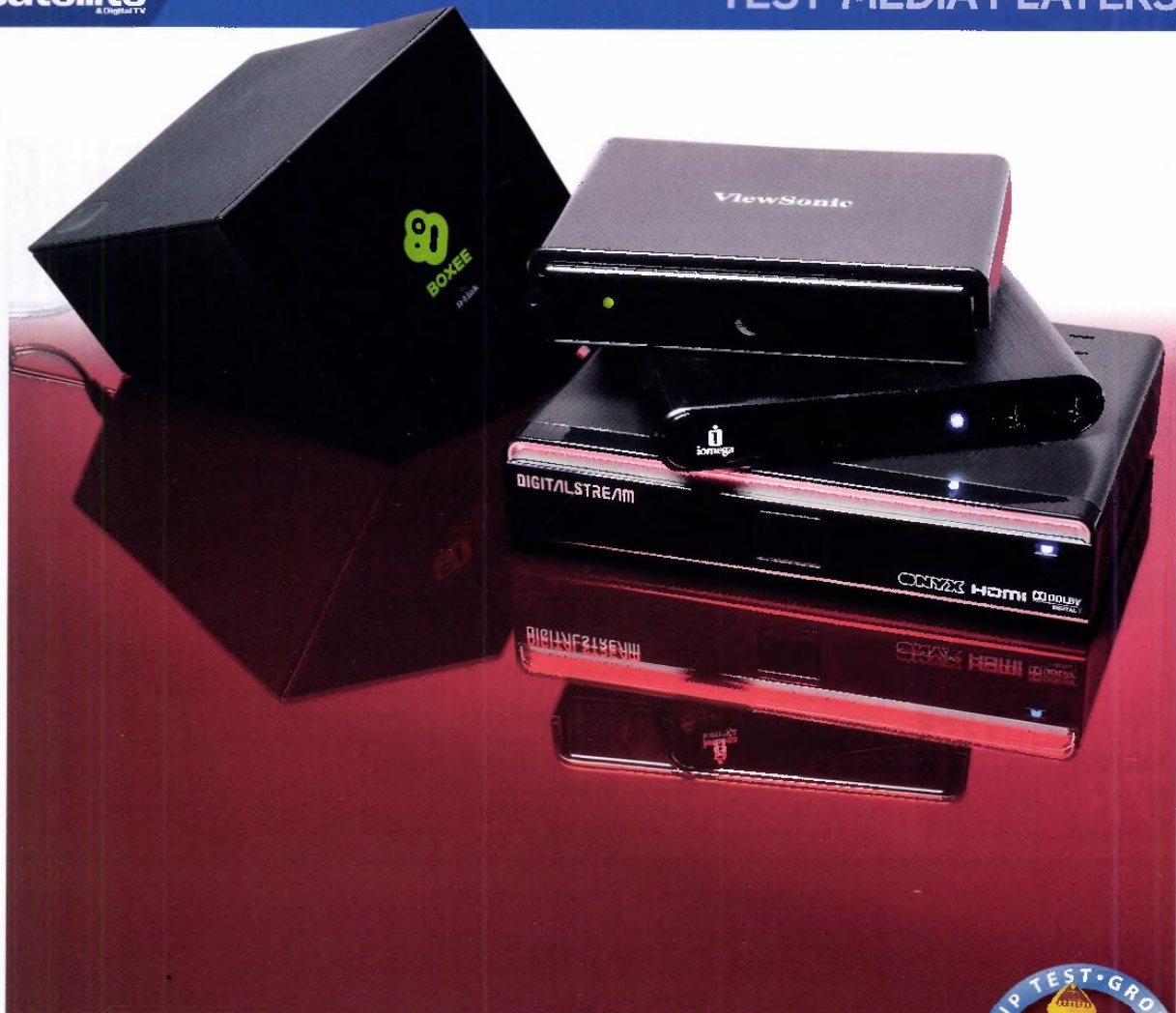




WHAT
satellite
AND DIGITAL TV

TEST MEDIA PLAYERS



Media players

Playing your media library on a TV doesn't have to mean plugging in your computer. You can use a media player instead

➤ Most PCs are as TV and media-friendly as they come these days – packing suitable playback software and outputs for hooking them up to your TV including, in many cases, HDMI.

However, if you fancy watching video (recorded TV, perhaps) listening to music or browsing photos, it's not always desirable or practical (especially if someone else in the house is using it) to plug them in directly.

Broadband enabled

Many TVs, receivers and games consoles come with some provision for playing media from USB-connected drives or over a network, but a dedicated media player can be an alternative solution.

Sold with or without onboard storage, such devices can play files stored on USB connected drives (disc or

flash-based) including HD files. An increasing number can also play media from networked storage devices including wirelessly, but this usually entails buying an additional dongle. Other features to look out for include broadband-enabled functionality such as YouTube and in some cases Facebook and Twitter access and even open web browsing. A handful of devices also support streaming of catch-up TV services such as BBC iPlayer.

As well as being versatile and (generally) compact enough to slide unobtrusively under the TV, another benefit of media players without onboard storage is that many consume less power than some other popular devices offering similar functionality such as the notoriously power-hungry PlayStation 3.

Here are four media players without hard discs for your consideration.



Buying tips

- Being Wi-Fi-ready sometimes means you'll still need to add a dongle to get the functionality. These cost from £10 but not all boxes support all types
- If you have the option of web browsing (or Facebook or Twitter, etc) you may be better off adding a keyboard and mouse
- Check the list of supported file formats to ensure it tallies with those in your media library



www.dlink.co.uk ■ 0208 955 9000 ■ £200

D-Link BOXEE BOX

On either side of this striking console-like player sit a multi-format memory card slot, HDMI output, optical S/PDIF and analogue phono for audio and two USB ports.

A two-sided remote makes a decent stab at making it easy to operate what is pretty much a media PC from your sofa. Three pads on one side cover basic navigation, playback and selection aided by a menu which appears at the top of the screen and allows you to type in URLs, search online or for files on connected drives. Flipping it over reveals a QWERTY keyboard with pleasingly tactile buttons whose cursor controls are an effective mouse substitute when working in conjunction with a virtual keyboard (wireless mice and keyboards are supported).

The interface is well tailored to TVs. The main categories are Friends (where you can recommend shows via Facebook and Twitter), Watch Later (reserved videos), Shows (streamable online programming), Movies (also online) and Files (for browsing your own content), the latter three with sorting (A-Z) and text entry/genre-based search options.

'Apps' includes RSS feeds, links to vodcasts, podcasts, internet radio and catch-up TV from 130 online sources such as YouTube, MUBI (cult films), 4oD, Demand Five and BBC iPlayer (SD only). The software is open source, so users can create their own apps for direct downloading.

Channel 4 shows are those on YouTube. BBC iPlayer



uses the big-screen interface but attempts to play in full screen were met with the picture freezing.

For networking, Samba client and UPnP-compatible devices are supported. Wi-Fi is built in.

There's extensive format support but the lack of playlisting within the box (you can import playlists) is puzzling.

The Boxee has the best interface here and the best remote but, at heart, it's still a costly media player without HDD. We hope iPlayer will also be 'fixed' soon.

Ratings

PLUS

- Slickly integrated interface
- Cool remote
- Broad format support

MINUS

- Expensive
- iPlayer needs work
- No onboard playlisting

Build	★★★★★★
Setup	★★★★★★
Performance	★★★★★★
Features	★★★★★★
Value	★★★★★★

WHAT satellite & Digital TV
78%

www.digitalstreamdirect.co.uk ■ 0844 409 9220 ■ £85

Digital Stream DPS-1000



The DPS-1000 is powered by the same Onyx TV software found on some Cello Freeview TVs.

Form-wise, it's fairly functional yet larger than the Viewsonic and Iomega products tested here. A busy remote feels a little cheap and could do with streamlining in the button department. The rear houses two USB ports, a single Scart and HDMI but no separate audio outputs. Ethernet can be used for DLNA/uPnP networking but you'll need to add your own USB dongle for Wi-Fi.

Functionality is grouped under three headings: Home Media (for playing your own files), BBC iPlayer and Web TV. Web TV includes YouTube, Flickr and links to a rather mixed assortment of streamable vodcasts from the likes of Jamie Oliver, UEFA and Sesame Street, some in poor quality. BBC news and weather, Facebook and Twitter

widgets appear in the main menu or can be called up while watching a video.

Open web browsing is possible using the remote and an onscreen keyboard. This works well enough, but you can use a real keyboard if preferred, although mice aren't supported. However, even on a 20MB connection loading basic web pages took far longer than is acceptable.

BBC iPlayer gets the 'big screen' treatment but shows supposedly in HD played only in SD instead. A healthy list of playable formats includes MKV, AVI, XviD, WMV, MP4 and MP3, but HD output is limited to 1080i. Video playback via HDMI looked a tad soft compared with using our PlayStation 3 and playlisting isn't supported.

The DPS-1000 promises a lot but in its current state feels rather unfinished.

Ratings

PLUS

- BBC iPlayer
- Networked streaming
- Web browsing ability

MINUS

- Not Full HD
- Web browsing slow
- iPlayer HD not working (for us)

Build	★★★★★★
Setup	★★★★★★
Performance	★★★★★★
Features	★★★★★★
Value	★★★★★★

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67%



■ www.iomega.co.uk ■ £100 approx

Iomega SCREENPLAY TV LINK DIRECTOR EDITION



➤ The TV Link Director Edition is essentially Iomega's ScreenPlayer Director stripped of onboard storage, though the solid aluminium casing resembles a slimline external hard drive.

Less attractive is the power light that glows a brilliant white up front and is distracting. The unit also runs quite hot after little more than an hour in use.

There are two USB ports up front and one more at the rear. AV outputs comprise HDMI and composite video, an optical digital audio output and stereo phonos. A Scart adapter is provided for the composite and phono outputs. Ethernet is included for networking (with uPnP or DLNA-compatible sources) or you can add a wireless dongle, though it has to be Iomega's own (£31).

The remote is a little too quirky in terms of design and buttons but serves its purpose, though we had to point it straight-on with the box to guarantee a response.

The interface isn't too pretty to look at either. Music, video and photo menus are used to browse files stored on connected drives and an Online Media menu provides access to YouTube clips (in SD only with search ability) with the option to add links to Flickr, Shoutcast radio and RSS feeds via Iomega's website. With storage attached, you can use the TV Link as a torrent client. Playlisting of files isn't supported but there's a slideshow mode for photos.

Video can be fast-forwarded and rewound at six levels of speed indicated by onscreen arrows. High-quality MP3s and XviD files sounded/looked as good as expected, but while our MKV HD files appeared sharp we experienced loss of audio sync on one, whereas other players had no trouble.

Somewhat pricey, the TV Link is decidedly basic and lacking in stand-out features.

Ratings

PLUS

- Reasonably plug-and-play
- Format support
- Sturdy casing

MINUS

- Remote isn't great
- Basic software
- Limited dongle options

Build	★★★★★
Setup	★★★★★
Performance	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★
Value	★★★★★

WHAT
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68%

■ www.viewsoniceurope.com/uk ■ £135

Viewsonic VMP74



➤ The top model in Viewsonic's current range of media players comes with bonus broadband-enabled functionality including YouTube, web browsing and soon BBC iPlayer (for which, at the time of writing, beta software is doing the rounds).

It's a tidy little box, sporting nothing but a power light on the fascia. Connections include one combined eSATA/USB port, a separate USB port, an HDMI, composite video output and hi-fi line out and analogue phono outputs. A wireless dongle (not included) is required for Wi-Fi.

The VMP 74's piano-black shininess extends to the accompanying remote. A cut above the average controller, this isn't short of similar-looking buttons, which is initially overwhelming. The interface resembles a basic version of Sony's Xross Media bar sporting a row

of icons. Supporting DLNA and uPnP devices, the VMP74 easily detected our Western Digital My Book World II NAS drive and PC with Windows, Vista Media Player and Twonkey server software installed.

Format support ticks most key boxes including subtitles files. Files can be playlisted but you're limited to fast-forwarding and rewinding at up to 16x normal speed – slow for movies. Open web browsing is possible using the supplied remote and an onscreen keyboard, which is a passable control method, though you can add your own wireless mouse and keyboard (you have only two USB ports to play with). Sites can be bookmarked but YouTube doesn't appear in its big screen-friendly form. BBC iPlayer will be welcome but the VMP74, though easy to use, is still overpriced.

Ratings

PLUS

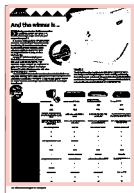
- Easy setup
- Good format support
- Open web browsing

MINUS

- Quite expensive
- Busy remote
- Needs more features

Build	★★★★★
Setup	★★★★★
Performance	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★
Value	★★★★★

WHAT
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73%



WHAT satellite
A Digital TV

And the winner is...



Getting a media player 'right' means making it as easy to use from your sofa as a PC, otherwise you might as well plug your computer into your TV.

It also helps that everything works as it should and here is where the Digital Stream is currently found lacking. It's clearly in need of a software overhaul in many areas, suggesting that it emerged from the production line rather too early. That's a shame, really, as it has a lot of potential.

Omega's TV Link Screenplay Director Edition lacks a decent remote and features that would justify the asking price. If our review still has you intrigued you might want to go for the hard drive-equipped Screenplayer Director HD, which offers better value with prices starting at £125 for a 1TB model.

Viewsonic's VMP74 doesn't offer enough enticements either for its quite hefty £135 price tag. Yet it is better built than the Omega and Digital Stream with easy to use software, which earns it a second-place spot on balance. We hope the soon-to-come iPlayer update will include HD streaming ■
Grant Rennell



Verdict

The D-Link Boxee Box isn't cheap and its design may put off some. But clearly a lot of thought has gone into its usability and the nifty dual-sided remote and cleverly integrated interface prove an effective combination. Some bugs need fixing (iPlayer especially) but factor in extensive format support and you have a worthy winner.



				
Make and model	D-Link Boxee Box	Digital Stream DPS-1000	Omega ScreenPlay TV Link Director Edition	Viewsonic VMP74
Receiver price	£200	£85	£100	£135
Maximum resolution	1080p	1080i	1080p	1080p
Video formats	FLV/H.264, AVC, MOV, AVI, MKV, WMV, MPEG-1/2/4, TS, DivX, XviD, WMV9	MPEG-1/2/4, AVC/H.264, VC-1, WMV9	DivX, XviD, MPEG-1/2/4, WMV, AVC HD, MKV	AVI, WMV, MPEG-1/2/6, ISO, VOB, IFO, ASF, TS, M2TS, MOV, MKV, TRP
Audio formats	MP3, WAV, WMA, AIF/AIFF, AAC, OGG Vorbis, FLAC, Dolby Digital, Dolby True HD	MPEG-2, MP3, Dolby Digital (AC3), AAC+, WMA	AC3, WAV, WMA, MP3, OGG Vorbis, AAC (non-DRM), FLAC	MP3, WMA, ACC, DTS, FLAC, OGG, PCM, LPCM, WAV
Image formats	JPEG, PNG, GIF, BMP, TIFF	JPEG, TIFF	JPEG, BMP, GIF, PNG, TIFF	JPEG, TIFF, PNG, GIF, BMP
Pod/Vodcasts	●	●	-	●
Internet radio	●	●	●	●
Catch-up TV	BBC iPlayer, Demand Five, 4oD	BBC iPlayer	-	-
Open web browsing	●	●	-	●
HD video out	HDMI	HDMI	HDMI	HDMI
SD video out	-	Scart (RGB, composite)	Composite	Composite
Audio out	Analogue phonos, Optical S/PDIF	via Scart/HDMI only	Analogue phonos, Optical S/PDIF	Optical S/PDIF hi-fi line out
USB ports	2	2	3	2
Memory card slot	SD/MMC	-	-	-
Network	Ethernet, Wi-Fi	Ethernet, Wi-Fi	Ethernet, Wi-Fi	Ethernet, Wi-Fi
Wi-Fi dongle required	-	●	●	●
Ratings %	78	67	68	73