

Wires (Less)

Wired home electronics are fast going the way of transistor radios. And cassette recorders. (Remember those?) The unplugged life is, ironically, the best way to stay “plugged in.”

By Meredith Nelson

THE WAR ON WIRES IS IN FULL swing. As home entertainment systems grow increasingly popular and affordable, so too are the technologies designed to eliminate the rat's nest of plugs, cables, and multiple-cord panels that ensnare — and confound — their owners.

Once strictly the purview of the high-end audiophile — a top-of-the-line Gefen Wireless for HDMI Extender for a home theater can run in excess of \$1,000 — the possibilities for economical wireless systems are now many.

We're on the brink of wireless nirvana, Neil Randall, *PC Magazine* contributor and co-author of the magazine's book *Wireless Solutions*, tells Newsmax.

“The wireless home network, which not too long ago was very difficult to set up, is now a given,” Randall says.

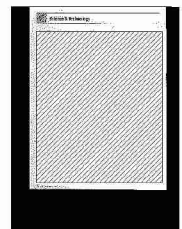
Today's wireless entertainment system starts with the same home Wi-Fi network most folks use to connect to the Internet.

Routers can beam signals to a growing number of compatible devices, including audio gear, video game consoles, even cameras and printers.

A home wireless network can even turn your iPod and cell phone into providers of entertainment —



DAVE CUTLER/STOCK ILLUSTRATION SOURCE/GETTY IMAGES



on demand. Routers, most of which are about the size of a small box of chocolates, are priced around \$40, Randall says. They're available from vendors including D-Link, Linksys, and Netgear.

"A wireless network is easy to set up, as you don't have to route cables through walls, floors, or ceilings," Marty Sems writes in FirstGlimpse online. "And adding another wireless device is as easy as installing an adapter."

The Wi-Fi devices augment another important short-range wireless connectivity platform known as Bluetooth, Randall says. Bluetooth's automatic device discovery and instant connection make it perfect for devices such as wireless headsets and speakers.

Wireless stereo headphones have improved a lot, Randall adds. "They're getting better and better — they used to have all kinds of cracks and pops and things."

Wireless is an especially attractive option for rear-channel amps and speakers in home theater setups. Whereas wires previously had to be strung from the entertainment center across the living room and behind the sofa (or snaked above the ceiling in a dicey maneuver if you're not a professional), a simple box with an antenna and a couple of small wireless speakers can do the trick now. Devices from JBL or Kenwood run about \$150.

Randall offers up a typical wireless home entertainment scenario: "You've got a TV in your family room and another TV that you're not using, and another TV in one of your kids' rooms. Let's say you get a DVD that somebody wants to watch and the actual DVD [player] is in the family room. You can stream it else-

where if the kids want to watch it."

One of the easiest things for most people to start with in their wireless home entertainment setups is Microsoft's Windows Media Center, Randall says. It comes with standard Windows Vista and will be part of the upcoming Windows 7, coming out this year, but it also can be used with a Mac.

"I have Windows Media Center on my desktop in my study," Randall says. "I record television shows, or put all kinds of music files on my hard drive in the basement, and my kids each have a laptop. They have Windows Media Center, too, so now they can wirelessly connect to the wireless home center and access both the audio library and the video library, and they can listen to things separately. And they can access it any time through the wireless network."

The possibilities are obviously vast, but technology writer Sems says the technology has room to grow. For example, common household devices such as microwaves and baby monitors still frequently disrupt wireless data traffic. And security is an issue: "Any wireless network needs to be securely encrypted to protect your personal data from hackers, and that takes processing power on both the sending and receiving ends.

"If you use strong encryption, your streaming video might stutter. If you use weaker encryption, your network [is easier] to hack," Sems writes on FirstGlimpse.

The verdict for wireless at this stage: "It's fine for audio but less so for video," Sems writes.

"You can get decent results with low-resolution video clips and even

"The wireless home network, which not too long ago was very difficult to set up, is now a given."

TAMING YOUR CABLES

► WHERE A WIRELESS CONNECTION isn't a feasible option, there's a vast array of cool stuff that can help you manage untidy, dust-gathering tangles of cables. Here are a few.

■ **Bluelounge CableBox.** Stores cables, surge protectors, and power strips of all shapes and sizes. The lid is also a logical spot to place connected devices. Made from fire-retardant plastic.

■ **Cable Wraps.** A variety of models, including the Cable Turtle, Cable Winder, the CordPro Cord Organizer, and the Cableoyo, help restore order to out-of-control cables by wrapping them neatly into manageable and compact coils. For these and a plethora of other cord-controlling products, visit CableOrganizer.com.

■ **PowerSquid Surge3000 Calamari Edition** (at right). Fully equipped with a whopping 3,240 Joules of surge protection to handle the most dangerous power surges and electrical spikes. It also offers two blue neon-glowing outlets so you can always find a plug under a dark desk. Several online computer sites offer it for around \$70, although some charge much more. — M.N.



some nicer-looking stuff when conditions are right. Once you step up to higher-quality content, however, the frustrations may outweigh your enjoyment."

So at this stage, for those who don't have a grand or more to shell out for something like the Gefen Wireless for HDMI Extender, don't you have to be one of those tech geeks to cobble these wireless networks together?

Randall insists not. "We're past that," he says. "The future is very simple: Wireless is going to expand, and more devices that were wired will become wireless." □

COURTESY OF POWERSQUID