

# TECH TALK

Bob Appleby

## What Do You Want for Christmas?

Anyone who knows me, knows that I am a gadget hound. I love almost anything digital, whether it is computer hardware or software, a digital camera or video recorder, any kind of entertainment device. I love working with them. I have one of the greatest jobs because it gives me the opportunity to try out new products every day. In this issue I am going to share some of my thoughts about media players and how to choose the best one for you.

Whether you want to use a media player while you exercise, to fill time when you commute to work, or to be entertained while you are doing odd jobs around the house, you probably have lots of time you could fill. You can listen to music, news, podcasts or seminars that enhance or train you for a new skill, job or hobby. You may want to be entertained with video like TV shows, movies or some of the other amazing content that is popping up all over the Internet. All of these different ways of using media devices should be considered before you purchase. There is a definite line drawn in the sand between manufacturers of media devices. Apple has the lion's share of this market. I'm sure you have heard of the iPod. I would be surprised if you haven't. Apple makes many different devices to fill the different needs of this market. Other manufacturers make products that provide different features that might have a better fit for the way you use a media player and give you more flexibility. I'll be talking about products that have the widest range of compatibility with the different music and audio book services.

I used to be an avid book reader and when electronic book devices arrived on the scene, I was one of the first adopters. The only problem that I had with them was that there were many times that it was inopportune to use them. So I migrated to listening to books on tape. Audio books eventually evolved to CD's and then became fully digital from online sources like Audible.com, who now provides

over 50,000 titles in audio format at a reasonable cost. So when I look at media devices, the first criteria that I have is whether it will support Audible.com's audio format directly. If the device does so it is much easier to move the data onto the player. All of the products that I will be talking about support this feature.



Once you have purchased your device you need a way to manage your content both on and off of the device. Most of the players come with software to make this fairly easy, but only Apple's iTunes and Microsoft's Zune Marketplace put it all together in a simple, easy-to-use interface that also lets you purchase new content and manage it. Apple's iTunes is your primary method of purchasing music, TV shows, audio books, games and applications for iPod devices. With the iTunes program you can also import media from other sources like your CD collection or other online content you may purchase from sources like Amazon and others. If you want one simple interface for managing your media you will probably want to stick with iTunes or Microsoft Marketplace. Microsoft's Marketplace encompasses not only their Zune media players, but also Xbox and other internet services you might use with your computer.

Let's begin with the simple mp3 players that do not support video. Apple makes a product called the iPod Shuffle that is priced at \$49 for the 1GB version and \$69 for the 2GB and comes in many colors. The best competition here is probably the



Creative MuVo T100 with 4GB storage direct USB connection to you PC and costs less at \$44.95. Not as cute a design but it will do the job. The MuVo T200 has a 4GB version, sports FM radio and a voice recorder and adds a LED in the design to make it easier to work with the unit, \$69.95. These devices are no frill units that have one purpose, to play mp3 files. You can listen to music or other audio content, but there is little or no visual control of the content on the device. These units are great for people who use the devices while they are working out, if you want something lightweight and don't need the control.

For more storage and control, Apple's iPod nano might be a better choice. It is available in an 8GB



(\$149) or 16GB (\$199) version, again with many colors to choose from. It has a 2 inch diagonal LCD screen support and 320x240 pixels. It uses Apple's iPod dock connector for charging and connectivity. I bring this up because so many third party manufacturers' make add-on products that work with this connection. I have an under counter TV that has a built-in iPod bay connector. This allows you to play back content through the device while you are charging it. These devices are also lightweight,

and small, all solid state and will give you better flexibility. The screen is small but will work for watching short videos, showing off your snapshots and of course give you on screen control.



Microsoft has come out with their Zune media player that competes in this space. It is available in 4GB, 8GB and 16GB versions, has a 1.8 inch screen and is priced at \$129, \$149 and \$199 respectively. The Zune has some added features that may peak your interest that include FM Radio, 802.11 wireless connectivity and software that supports purchasing content wirelessly as well as syncing wirelessly. Microsoft has built these units around compatibility with the rest of their product line including connectivity and control through your Xbox as well. The Marketplace is easy to use but the software for pushing content to the unit is a little slow moving between screens. While it is better than when it first came out, it is still a little clunky. Like iTunes, the Marketplace works well for podcast distribution and works well with both audio and video podcasts. Their interface is simple and easy to use to control your subscriptions.

Since we are a Microsoft household, the Zune was my unit of choice. I jumped on the bandwagon with the larger hard drive version which takes us to the next level. If you like carrying around most of your music collection, photos, lots of audio books, movies, TV shows and other video then you are going to need





owns the market without any real competition to speak of. Except for one control button that takes you back to the main menu the iPod touch is controlled through its touch screen interface. This is an awesome entertainment device supporting audio, video, gaming, internet access, personal information management (PIM) and much more. This unit does

the larger storage capacity. Apple and Microsoft have both addressed this need. Microsoft with their 30, 80 and 120GB units priced at \$169, \$229 and \$249 respectively. These units have all the same capabilities as the smaller units but with a larger 3.2 inch screen. The iPod Classic comes in just a 120GB version and is priced the same as the Zune at \$249. It has a slightly smaller screen, 2.5 inches, and still requires direct connection to control content. I like the Zune's extra features but it is hard to beat the large number of add-on products that Apple's players work with. Apple's dock connector has become the industry standard and you have a large number of accessories that take full advantage of this connectivity. So if the wireless and radio features don't entice you, the iPod is still the better choice.



A year and a half ago, Apple introduced the iPhone and shortly thereafter the iPod Touch unit was released for those that wanted the features of the iPhone without the phone. This is where Apple totally

have wireless connectivity that gets you onto the internet wherever you have WiFi access. If you need full access while on the road the iPhone supplies that. The iPod touch is available in 8, 16 and 32GB models, is solid state, and ranges in price from \$229, \$299 and \$399 respectively. It is thin, light and has a 3.5 inch screen with an awesome interface. Its only drawback is its storage capacity. So if you are eager to have everything at your fingertips, you'll love these products.

As you can see, there are a lot of choices out there and most of them are based on how you want to use the media device, how much capacity you need and the features that you want at your fingertips. There are a lot of other devices on the market to choose from as well. I have mainly focused on those that have the supporting network to drive the media onto the device. This is usually half the battle. I have owned and used a great many products and the software that controls the interface has always been the most critical part of using these devices. The easier it is, the less frustrated you will be when using it. I hope this has given you some insight into the products and their capabilities and will make your purchasing decision much easier.

Have a wonderful Holiday Season, and I will see you soon in the next issue.

*Bob has been working in the computer field since 1975 and started Computer Connections with his partner Jude Daigle in 1981 at the beginning of the personal computer revolution. Bob grew up in Ligonier and graduated from Ligonier H.S. in 1972. George Washington University is his college alma mater and he is currently living in the Greensburg area. You can see more tech tips and product reviews in Bob's Blog pages at [www.bobstechtalk.com](http://www.bobstechtalk.com).*

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