



The network is your friend

I'VE ALWAYS VIEWED WITH SKEPTICISM those pie-in-the-sky predictions that “any day now,” everything with an electronic “heartbeat” will have its own IP address. The hype machine might have hit its zenith a few

years ago at CES (Consumer Electronics Show) when Scott McNealy from Sun Microsystems, during his keynote, tried to convince the audience that their next refrigerators had to have persistent Internet connections (and, of course, run Java).

Slowly but surely, though, I'm—in the words of all great politicians—revising my position on the matter. Specifically, a network hub now sits behind the home-theater cabinet in my living room.

In mid-1999, I briefly flirted with the idea of putting a then-high-end PC in the living room, hooked to the then-NTSC TV. The PC didn't last long; my wife complained that the fan was too noisy. And the display quality was horrible. (My Princeton Graphics AF3.0HD DTV would have fixed that problem had I owned it at the time.) Although the PC disappeared, I left in place the Ethernet cable, running under the house between the living room and the office's router.

Last fall, I bought the Voyetra Turtle Beach Audiotron. Bingo, a use for that Ethernet plug! Ironically, although Voyetra Turtle Beach originally designed the Audiotron to play only music stored elsewhere on the LAN, I use it exclusively to tune in Internet radio stations from all around the world. Its built-in Web server lets me talk to it from any browser.

It's funny. Invariably I end up owning the things I write about! Next on the list was a Microsoft Xbox. When I bought it, I wasn't much of a gamer. But when I came across a factory-refurbished unit on sale for \$179, I couldn't resist. Why? Because Xbox is quite an engineering achievement. And it's cool.

My wife and I are now part-time gamers. I am impressed with Halo, and Mat Catz's MC2 Racing Wheel and Pedals both enhance the realism of Nascar Heat and prepare me for occasional commutes to Silicon Valley. Thanks to the high-definition A/V pack, the visuals and sound are topnotch. And thanks to services such as Gamespy Arcade, Xbox Gateway, and Xbconnect, I don't have to wait for Microsoft's Xbox Live Network, due out later this year, to play against other folks around the world through that

I'M A BOOB-TUBED, BLOWN-AWAY “HUB”-BY.

same Ethernet connection. (That's why I need the hub.)

What can I do with the other two hub ports? Sonicblue sent me a ReplayTV 4040, now known as the 4504, to try. I normally don't watch much TV, but this gadget seems to be causing me to also revise my position on the boob tube.

The ReplayTV has all the normal PVR (personal-video-recorder) features—time shifting, a program guide, autoprogramming of favorite shows based on criteria you specify, and autoskipping of commercials, for example. But I want to focus on the Ethernet connection on the back of the unit. It automatically downloads new program-guide info every evening. It lets me configure and control the 4040 via the MyReplayTV Web site from anywhere in the world. It lets me send recorded programs to other ReplayTVs, either inside or beyond my house. And it lets me view digital still images stored on other LAN-connected computers.

The remaining hub port is beg-

ging for me to plug something into it. So, I just bought an \$80 80-Gbyte Ultra ATA-133 hard drive. I'm thinking about setting up a media server. I figure that if I stick the PC in the closet, the fan noise won't be too bad. And even after I run out of wired network connections, my home-improvement projects don't need to end. Since late 2000, I've had an 802.11b wireless network running in the house. The only units that currently tap into it are notebook PCs and Pocket PCs. But thanks to widgets such as Linksys' WET11 Wireless Ethernet Bridge, anything with an Ethernet port is a Wi-Fi candidate. And as more pieces of equipment, such as D-Link's DCS-1000W wireless Internet camera, come with built-in Wi-Fi transceivers, I won't even need WET11s.

ARPANET, later called the Inter-

net, went online in 1970. For its first two decades, its e-mail, ftp, Gopher, Usenet, and other arcane capabilities were the near-exclusive domain of researchers. Then, in early 1993, a graduate student at the University of Illinois (Urbana/Champaign) named Marc Andreessen released into the public domain the Mosaic Web browser, which he based on recently standardized HTTP. Less than 10 years later, the term “Google” has *even* become part of my father's vocabulary. Sorry, Scott, I still don't buy the idea of the Java refrigerator. But I'm warming to the concept of pervasive network “telephone numbers.”

Engineering is more than just conquering technical what-ifs. It's wrapping the solutions in easy-to-understand, compelling packaging for the masses. And walking the tightrope between underestimating and overestimating when the masses will be ready to open those packages. Shall we walk the tightrope together, you and I?

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