



Steven Levy

Set Your TV Free

Boxee's Net video app shows the promise—and peril—of divorcing your cable company.

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ow, I don't want to wind up in hell. But if that fate befalls me, I anticipate finding my cable provider roasting alongside me. In fact, cable television service in general has a reek of Hades about it. Consumers typically have only one cable company available to them, and that company often chooses its channel lineup based on business relationships instead of on what people want to watch. The customer service would shame Stalin. Plus, cable costs too much—and the price keeps rising. 1 So why not replace it with all the free video available on the Internet? After all, you can get new and old TV shows on the networks' Web sites, movies on Netflix (all-you-can-eat for subscribers), and everything else on YouTube. The problem is that television is really best watched on, well, a television. The canonical viewing position—horizontal—requires balancing a laptop on your belly. Enter Boxee, an open source application that, according to CEO Avner Ronen, strives to be the Firefox of video. The global browser funnels all that Internet content, as well as media you've downloaded, to your television. Though Boxee is still in its early stages, a couple

Burning Question

Can I use the recession as a bargaining chip?

These scary economic times have a lot of us looking to trim our tech budgets. But before you lose the premium cable channels, upgraded broadband, and unlimited international calling plan, you may want to try a little price negotiation. You might be worried, but your service providers are crapping bricks. The recession has actually increased your leverage. By articulating their worst fear (losing customers), you can wangle huge savings.

"The business climate is changing, and we continuously adjust for that," says Robyn Watson, PR director at Time Warner Cable. That's code for "Let's talk." Operators are standing by, and they're trained to cycle through a script that's dripping with juicy options. Negotiate well and you'll tease out the goodies they tried to withhold at first.

Going in, it helps to know the competition your service provider faces. If you have satellite TV and broadband from the phone company, be familiar with the most recent cable bargain bundle. Or vice versa: Has the a la carte crowd been pimping price drops to entice switching? Work it. If you're willing to take your business elsewhere, that's even better. In addition to introductory honeymoon rates, they probably have unadvertised sweeteners. If you do switch, though, mark

your calendar and call back in six months or a year when the rate adjusts. Savvy consumers know that this little dance is a recurring affair.

But be careful of stepping on toes. Don't just call up and immediately threaten to leave. Herb Cohen, who helped set up the FBI's hostage negotiation program, cautions against acting too smart. "Intellect is an asset, but only if it's concealed," he says. "Dumb is better than smart." You want to be saying, "Can you explain this to me? I heard from a friend who got such-and-such a deal." That'll switch the rep into deal-making mode. Eventually, try to flip your opponent to your point of view by involving them in your decisionmaking, with questions like "If you were me, what would you do?"

Some operators will be quick with a brush-off, so don't be afraid to hang up and

try again. If you're not having any luck, you can always ask for the retention department (the folks with beaucoup bargaining power) right out of the chute. Just remember to never be rude—angrily demanding a manager isn't going to make anyone want to do you any favors. And never be afraid to walk. If nothing else, a history of fickleness might lend extra credibility to your tough talk in the future.—CLIFF KUANG



Boxee is an offshoot of the XBMC project, which was written to turn first-generation Xbox game consoles into media centers.

hundred thousand head-firsters have already checked it out, most of them using the otherwise superfluous Apple TV box as the conduit for getting online content to the boob tube.

I wanted in.

Installing Boxee on a computer is straightforward. But running it on an Apple TV requires a bit of perseverance. You have to copy the software to a flash drive that can boot up the Apple TV. After a restart, Boxee pops up in the menu choices. But when I selected it, my screen briefly displayed an Apple logo sliced in half, then went black. The fallback method uses a laptop to access the Apple TV's operating system and paste in code to reprogram the device.

To my astonishment, this worked.

Boxee is alpha software, so it's hard to assess its features fairly. The social networking that's built in, which lets you see

what your friends have watched, looks promising. And the clean interface lets you surf through not only your own media collection but also online video sources like CBS.com, CNN.com, and Hulu, as well as audio providers like NPR.org. What I really wanted to do was watch *30 Rock*, so I selected Hulu from the Internet Videos menu, then chose the most recent episode. Too bad you can't do this anymore. Hulu has since asked Boxee to remove its service, much to the chagrin of couch potatoes everywhere. Thankfully, other video purveyors aren't so short-sighted.

If services like Boxee are to live up to our hi-def dreams, they won't just need content providers to let them grow. They will also require broadband access with more speed and reliability than most people have now. Unfortunately, most of us connect to the

Internet via cable or telecom companies that are also in the business of selling video.

It's hard to imagine these companies cutting themselves off by making it easy to get broadband without television. "At the end, I don't think cable is going away," admits Boxee's Ronen, even as his service shows how easy it would be for cable to disappear. It makes sense to use the Internet as another way to distribute ad-supported content for free while letting users subscribe to premium services separately. Platforms like Boxee would allow anyone to distribute a TV channel, without begging or buying permission from the cable, telecom, and satellite czars.

Sounds good to me. And if the monopolists use their power to stave off progress, you know where I'll see them.