

Roku: One Smart Little Box!

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I am one of those guys always looking for the next gadget that will change my life, or at least how I am entertained. This is especially true if it comes with a streaming audio or video angle.

From iPods and iPhones, to WiFi radios galore, I have tried just about every new device that has come my way. Most are pretty much the same, while some really stand out as game-changers.

One of those for me was Apple TV. It gave me a centralized device for streaming my music from my phone, through Netflix, or from my computer.

I love my Apple TV device, but there has always been something nagging at me about it. I always have felt restrained, only able to play in the sandbox that Apple has created. I have always wished I could add apps for other services, especially Amazon's Instant Video or Pandora.

The answer, for me, was Roku.

Roku, much like Apple TV, is a small-footprint set-top box that gives you streaming content for video and music. The advantage here, though, is flexibility, both in the hardware and the software content.

❖ Out of the Box

Roku is pretty basic in design and function. You set it up to access your wireless network and away you go. The LT model that I purchased at \$49 does not have an Ethernet connection option, but the high-end Roku 2 XS does. It retails for about \$99, the same as the Apple TV.

There are several different Roku devices available, that come at varying price points. This is the first time you get to choose from available options with Roku. My Apple TV works only by HDMI connection, and I only have one-HDMI television in the house. However, I wanted a streaming content provider to put Netflix in the bedroom. So, I looked at the Roku LT. It maxes out at a resolution of 720p, which is perfect since I am using an old-fashioned tube television in the bedroom. It also allows me to connect to my television via RCA video and audio cables.

With this one device, I am able to breathe new life into an otherwise out-dated television.

This thing is small and lightweight. It will not take up a large amount of space amongst your home theater gadgets. The included remote is also small and easy to use. On the LT model I purchased, there are large buttons to give you instant access to Netflix, Crackle and Pandora.

For those with an iOS or Android device, you also can download an app that provides remote control of your Roku device and a few other goodies.



❖ Performance Test

The next great thing about the Roku is that it provides you with multiple apps that it calls 'channels' that you can download (many for free) that give you flexibility to enjoy the content that matters most to you. In addition to Netflix, Crackle (streaming video and movies) and Pandora, there are downloadable apps for HBO Go, Weather Underground, Amazon Instant Video, even TuneIn digital radio.

A recent upgrade allows users to search for content across all of these providers. So, if I want to search for which channel is going to have episodes of "Arrested Development," I search once, and it shows me all of the options that are available to me. This sure beats searching in each individual provider's channel, which is what I have to do currently with Apple TV.

Picture quality and streaming reliability seem to be rock-solid. One of the chief complaints I have of Apple TV is that the Netflix app will routinely be 'out of service.' I haven't experienced this with Roku yet. Even on my old CRT television, the picture quality looks great and the audio is pristine; no digital "lossy" sound.



MT RATING: 4 3/4 STARS



Overall: 4.75 out of 5 stars – Easy-to-use, reliable, affordable and flexible – probably every TV I own from this point on will have a Roku connected to it.

Roku recently released an upgrade that allows me to stream music and photos from my iOS or Android device through the Roku player. I have tested this feature, called Play on Roku, on both my iPhone and Kindle Fire versions of the app and it works wonderfully. The next step for them would be to add streaming video mirroring and possibly, a Roku 'icon' much like the Apple AirPlay icon, that would allow me to stream YouTube videos and more natively from my device.

My favorite app here, and one that would be worth the purchase price alone, is the Amazon Instant Video channel. Through this channel, subscribers to the Amazon Prime service can stream instant videos through their Roku device. You can even rent/purchase movies from Amazon that stream from the cloud. This is one function I have often wished my Apple TV device could support.

Roku isn't about just video, though. There are also channels for Pandora and TuneIn radio. You can stream your favorite music from Pandora, or listen to your favorite stations from TuneIn directly from the Roku device. I am even able to see radar and weather updates for my area directly from Weather Underground through that Roku channel. This comes in handy when severe weather is around.

With the exception of Netflix and Hulu Plus, most of what you will find available through the Roku device you won't find on Apple TV. This extra bit of flexibility (and lower price point for the LT model) made the Roku a no-brainer addition to my home entertainment setup.

❖ Final Word

I love my Roku, there isn't much here that I would improve upon, with the exception of more options for streaming from my mobile devices through their remote control app. The device itself though gives you plenty of options to choose from when it comes to device setup and even the content providers available.

My favorite part of the Roku is that through its flexibility, I am able to use it with any television I own, both new HDTV and old CRT models. I can run basic RCA cables or high-definition HDMI. For the LT version, \$50 makes this an extremely affordable home entertainment option, especially considering the amount of free content that is available through various providers (Pandora, TuneIn, Crackle, etc.).

For those of you without a smart TV, do yourself a favor, get a Roku. Very rarely will you be able to purchase something for so little, and get so much.