

Redefining A Paradigm

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Spot Quiz: What's the #1 cause of disappointment for most new LCD TV owners? I'd hazard a safe guess – most TV, movies included, doesn't look as good as the demo content that wowed you back in the showroom, does it? And with service providers not looking any more certain of providing high definition (HD) anytime soon, companies like Western Digital, Asus and Amkette are looking to tap consumers who have multimedia files stored on their computers and hard disks and want to bring them to their TVs without the hassle of complicated cabling and unsightly computer boxes in the living room! Let's have a quick look at what's on offer.

Having owned a previous iteration of the Western Digital WD TV Live HD, I had a head start on this one. It's by far the most pleasing looking of all the high definition media players we looked at, and had no problems reading every storage device we threw at it – USB flash drives, portable hard drives, even card readers. The user interface to choose what to play is very slick, very suited to big screen viewing with large icons and fonts. You plug in your storage, and the WD TV Live HD plays back pretty much any format under the sun – videos, photos and music. Just remember that whether you're connecting to your TV via the standard composite (yellow, red, white) cables or HDMI, you're limited by the quality of the file you are playing. The less compressed, high-resolution files will obviously look better – that's true for all players. Performance is top notch, with never a stutter even when it was playing back full 1080p content, and its 'Live' features – the ability to play back content over your home network or from the YouTube channel and Pandora Internet Radio were a cinch to configure. The only downer – its price. At Rs. 10,500, it's a pretty packet to shell out, and I'd have expected at least wireless capabilities or some free HDMI cables thrown in for good value.

With the Asus O!Play HDP-R1 (yeah, wrap your mind around that name!), the larger bulk gives it a sturdy feel, but the heavy use of plastic does tend to take the premium sheen away from the player. The two blue status LEDs up front are bright, and mildly distracting when you're viewing them straight on in a dark room. You get two USB ports, one of which doubles as an eSATA port as well. Around the back, you get a network port, along with stereo analogue audio, composite video, optical digital audio and HDMI. Like the WD offering, this lacks component video, so if you have an older TV which supports only this, you're out of luck. Switch it on, and you're presented with an interface that's nice and intuitive but not as refined as the WD. Performance is at par with the best in class, save for a niggling video preview while browsing videos. I quite liked the File Copy feature, which lets you copy files between USB/eSATA devices and network locations without booting a PC. Again, there's no wireless option, which makes this about okay at Rs. 9,000 - but the O!Play Air, due to be out soon, has wireless support and a memory card



And then there's Amkette. Find the name familiar? Those of us who've seen computers through the 80s and early 90s will remember Amkette to be a leader in the floppy disk market, which thankfully are a thing of the past today. The Amkette Flash TV takes a very different approach to the media player business. So, it doesn't support Full HD playback – it upscales all content to a reasonable 720p resolution. Inputs are via the single USB slot or the SD/MMC card slot, and output via coaxial audio, component and composite video. No HDMI, as you'd notice. The user interface is basic but clean, and I like the Go to function which lets you skip to a particular point in a video file by just entering the time. Performance is good, with no frame skipping for all the content I threw at it, but it doesn't support HD MKV file formats. You'd be very critical of the somewhat low tech approach Amkette has followed until you see the price. At Rs. 2,995, the Flash TV is a good 1/3rd the price of the other players, so while you do get what you pay for, it's not half bad if you're not obsessed with getting the highest possible resolution that your TV supports!



