The Custom Installer: Control Your World

John Sciacca | Jun 12, 2005

Computers have never really been my thing. I like them and have owned one since I was 8, starting with the incredibly *un*powerful Atari 400. But I'd always considered them just the next step toward a better videogaming experience. And while I *love* gaming, plunking down $2,000 for something I'd use almost exclusively as a gaming rig seemed a little excessive. But recent developments have totally changed the way I think about computers, and I'll bet they do the same for you.

That computer technology has crept out of the office and into our A/V systems is hardly news. It started with burning MP3 files onto CDs to play on MP3-capable CD and DVD players, and it progressed to *streaming* those same files over a home network. Today, it's nothing to use a network to move music, pictures, and video from one room to another, even wirelessly. I'm so spoiled now that I'm disappointed if a product I receive to review doesn't have an Ethernet connection!

That connection allows you to make the component part of a home network. Some devices use it to simply access the Internet, but the coolest gear is IP (Internet protocol) addressable, which means it has an internal Web browser so that you can *control* it over the Net.

Like a Social Security number, an IP address is a *unique* identifier - usually something like 192.168.2.28 - for each device on a network. This address allows each component to send and receive information over the network and ensures that the data will go to the right component. Typically, just plugging a new device into an open port on a router or network switch automatically generates its IP address.

One of the first places where IP technology showed up was home-security gear. For a few hundred dollars, you can install cameras that can be monitored on your PC, laptop, or any other Web-enabled device in your home. If you have a static IP address - one that's constant, unlike a dynamic address, which is different every time you log on - you can call up your network on a computer, PDA, or cellphone and view the camera images from anywhere in the world.

While most A/V manufacturers are using IP technology mainly as a bridge for moving information from your computer to your entertainment system, some more adventurous companies are pointing the way to the future. For instance, Escient's FireBall DVDM-300 media manager (see "<u>Serve It Up!</u>") lets you use the Web both to control the component and to browse CDs, DVDs, and music files stored on its hard drive. Meanwhile, NetStreams has introduced a totally IP-based audio system that can support an *unlimited* number of audio zones. Not only can you select the source and volume for each zone over the Web, but you can also send music over the network as uncompressed digital files. Polk has used Netstreams technology to create its LC*i-p* line of speakers, which are not only IP addressable but also have digital signal processing built right in so they can compensate for a room's acoustical problems, producing sound tailor-made for each environment.

But this is just the tip of the IP iceberg. As high-speed Internet access and home networks become more common, you can expect to see manufacturers of *all* types leap onto the bandwagon. Soon we'll be connecting our lighting, heating, appliances, and even lawn sprinklers to the network. Imagine how cool it'll be to use your cellphone to turn on your lights so you don't have to walk into a dark house. Automated versions of all of these appliances and systems are already available, but IP will open the door for a level of control previously reserved for people spending tens of thousands of dollars on advanced control systems and thousands more on programming.

Two years ago, if you walked into an electronics store and said, "IP," the staff would have thought you were a foreigner in dire need of a bathroom. Today, IP is everywhere, and tomorrow, it will be in everything. And that makes computers my thing.