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## SlingCatcher shows lots of PC-to-TV potential

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By Edward C. Baig, USA TODAY

Do you wish you could easily send videos or photos from your PC screen onto your living room TV? SlingCatcher, the latest hardware from Sling Media, lets you do just that, although I experienced some snags testing it.

SlingCatcher is not as liberating as the company's more famous Slingbox. The original Slingbox set-top box is a TV junkie's delight. Connect it to your TV, cable, satellite box or DVR. And then you can watch your home TV from miles away, on a laptop or cellphone.

SlingCatcher is different. The \$300 box lets you lift movies, photos and such from your PC so you can watch on a TV. It accomplishes this in one of three ways:

- You can copy video and audio files onto a portable USB storage drive and view and listen to them on the TV after plugging the drive into SlingCatcher.
- You can load SlingProjector software onto your PC and wirelessly display on the TV screen whatever is on the computer screen: slideshows, presentations, videos.
- If you have a Slingbox, you can use SlingCatcher to watch live or recorded shows on a television that's located in a different room from the TV (or DVR) that is connected to the Slingbox.

The SlingProjector feature is what attracted me to the SlingCatcher in the first place. I was able to watch stuff on my LG TV projected from my RealPlayer library, plus YouTube, Hulu.com, Netflix and Sling's own new Sling.com video portal.

The experience left something to be desired, though. You must control what you watch from the computer — in my case, a 1.86GHz Intel Core 2 Dell desktop running Windows Vista. SlingCatcher comes with a remote control. But the remote's functions are limited when using the SlingProjector feature, so pressing "pause" didn't halt a video I was watching. Videos were sometimes choppy or out of sync with the sound.

Here's a closer look:

- **The basics.** SlingCatcher is easy to set up, with one potential catch: You must hook it up to your TV and an Internet router. The two aren't always close by. The ethernet cable Sling provided wasn't long enough to reach my router, so I used a \$10 doohickey to extend the connection with a second cable, hardly an elegant solution.

Alternatively, Sling sells networking kits (\$80 on up) to transmit Internet signals through your home's wall plug sockets.

SlingCatcher looks like a smaller version of the trapezoidal Slingbox. It has two USB ports, plus jacks for composite, component, S-video and HDMI outputs. Basic audio/video cables are included, but I had to supply my own HDMI cable to use that higher-quality connection.

With HDMI, you get superior graphics. SlingCatcher will play back some high-definition files stored on a USB drive. For now, however, you cannot use SlingProjector to stream high-def video or Blu-ray discs from your PC to the TV. Nor can you yet stream high-def TV from a high-def-capable Slingbox, though Sling says the feature is coming via an upgrade.

- **Taking advantage of a Slingbox or USB.** Using a test account from Sling Media, I used SlingCatcher to tap into Slingboxes connected to satellite dishes, cable boxes and a TiVo in remote locations. I was able to use the supplied SlingCatcher remote control to change channels and select prerecorded TiVo programs. It worked well.

Videos copied onto USB drives I connected to SlingCatcher looked decent, too. This so-called MyMedia feature is compatible with most popular audio and video file formats.

But there are limitations.

USB storage drives must be formatted using a file system called FAT32. Sling says about half the popular USB drives are formatted that way already. If not, the company's SlingSync software will handle the chore. But it's too geeky for consumers.

You can use Sling software to find files on your drives and, if need be, convert them to a format that makes nice with SlingCatcher.

•**Making projections.** You have to download free SlingProjector software onto a Windows XP or Vista machine to project files off a PC. The software doesn't work with Macs. When you fire up the program, a control panel appears on your PC. You can project the entire PC screen onto a TV or position a border around a given area of the screen to project, say, just the window from which you are playing a video.

There's a short delay before what is on the computer screen shows up on the TV, but the idea is not to watch both at the same time anyhow. Sound comes out of the TV speakers only.

I watched podcasts, *Family Guy*, *The Office*, *30 Rock* and *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room*. Most TV shows looked OK, despite hiccups. But the Enron documentary I streamed from Netflix sputtered way too often. Sling says you'll have better results with a more robust PC.

Having to control the action from the PC was also a hassle, especially on short programs where I had to keep getting up and walking to the computer.

SlingCatcher is an intriguing product that can improve. But for now it's a tough sell.

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