Brian Clegg believes he has spotted the next revolution in home entertainment.

Movie magic

Every now and then a product moves from business into the home market and turns things upside down. The PC was a good example. It looks like the next home revolution might come from corporate in-house communications.

Cambridge-based firm Imerge produces technology to provide video across business networks. Now it is going one step further. Imerge has developed a concept product called Xiva. The key letters I, V and A stand for internet, video and audio. Xiva brings together these different media to create a new approach to entertainment. While Imerge foresees that products crossing all three evironments will be along in a year or two, early releases are likely to replace the video recorder and the audio player.

At first glance, a hard-disk-based digital video recorder seems unexciting. Okay, with good compression you can hold ten or more hours of video, but who wants a video player from which you can't remove the tape? Well, I do.

Imagine you are watching a film on TV. Half way through, the pinger goes on the cooker: time to take out the dinner. No problem. You press the pause button on the digital video. It starts recording the film. You return from the kitchen and press play. Now you see the recorded film from where you left off — but at the same time, the digital recorder is still capturing the rest off the air. It's real timeshifting, because unlike a video tape, a hard disk can read and write to different points simultaneously.

Taking that scenario further, Xiva can handle about four items at a time — so you can record multiple channels or get an intelligent recorder to produce a personal channel based on your preferences. The recorder would pick up information about the programs, broadcast alongside the pictures or sourced from the internet. Such information would also allow one-touch recording of a whole series. The audio equivalent would be able to hold hundreds of hours of music and play selectively according to your mood or time of day. With internet convergence, you could tie into a related web site to buy other tracks from the same artist or find out about concerts.

Imerge's technology will power a number of domestic players this year. Alternatively, software company MGI has demonstrated Pure DIVA, a software-only approach to digital recording for Pentium III PCs. The advantage of the MGI approach is that you don't need another box; the disadvantage is that most of us don't watch TV on PCs. See www.imerge.com and www.mgisoft.com to find out more about these technologies.

In a recent column I used Microsoft's Autoroute 2000 as an example of the way 'featuritis' can be a benefit, as the new feature of street-level mapping has transformed the product. A couple of readers have sent me emails saying my review missed problems. In fact, it wasn't so much a review as a discussion of new features, but I'd like to follow up those problems so I don't get the reputation of being on the Microsoft payroll (although I am open to extremely large offers, Bill).

Ian Fisher works for a television company, and finds a combination of Autoroute and GPS useful for getting to the spot quickly. He was delighted to hear about street-level mapping, but less delighted when he found GPS didn't work with it. I contacted Microsoft about this and it turns out that the street mapping 'isn't for routing, it's just for reference'.

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Thanks Microsoft — get it right next time, please. The second reader, John Harris, rushed out and bought five copies, only to find that Autoroute locked up his PC. According to Microsoft there is a known problem with a combination of Autoroute 2000, Outlook 98 and Internet Explorer 4 under NT 4. The company doesn't even have a provisional date for a fix — but at least it has offered a refund.

And now for something completely different. I've noticed that Visual Basic consultancy The Mandelbrot Set is running a 'VB Guru Programming Contest'. If you think you'd be any good at programming a guru, see www.themandelbrotset.com/html/vb_guru.html.

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