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REVIEW

Hit the road with home TV
Orb software lets you watch all favorite channels

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While everyone was talking about "the digital living room" at a technology conference in Foster City last week, one interesting new software on display showed how you can stretch your living room around the world.

The software, called Orb, lets you watch live the same TV channels you get at home -- even if you're across the country. All you need is a computer with a high-speed Internet connection, a compatible cell phone or handheld digital assistant.

And if you're stuck working late and won't be back in time to watch "The O. C." or a key college basketball tournament game, you can use Orb to program your home computer to record it.

You can even access your digital music and photos, as well as a Web cam to see the family eat the dinner you're missing.

Emeryville startup Orb Networks Inc., co-founded by former Cadence Design Systems Inc. CEO Joe

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Costello, introduced the software in October. But that version required using a computer running Microsoft's special Windows XP Media Center Edition, limiting Orb's universe of customers.

Today, the company hopes to tap a much wider audience when it releases a new version of Orb that works with the millions of computers running on the regular Windows XP operating system.

Orb Networks charges \$9.99 per month or \$79.99 per year for a subscription, but also offers a 30-day free trial.

Orb Vice President Joe Harris said the firm eventually hopes to land distribution deals with technology partners that would "take that subscription fee down to zero as much as we can."

In testing Orb last week, I found it was easy to set up and that it works as advertised.

Orb works by setting up a secure, one-to-one connection between a home and remote computer or viewing device, channeled through an Orb server. To avoid running afoul of the piracy-wary entertainment industries, Orb designed the system to stream, not copy, media files, although I was able to easily make copies of digital photos.

First, you load the Orb software into a computer that serves as your digital media base.

Orb Networks recommends a computer with a 2.4 GHz processor, 512 MB of RAM and 100 MB of hard disk space. The computer also needs a TV tuner card, but be sure it's one that's supported by the Windows XP version of Orb.

I used a Toshiba Qosmio laptop with Windows XP Media Center Edition and a built-in TV tuner card. The demo model supplied by Toshiba only has a 1.80 GHz processor, but that didn't seem to cause any problems.

When I got to work, I used a Web browser to log on to my Orb account. Within seconds, I was watching an episode of "The Contender" that I had recorded with the Media Center Edition's digital video recorder program. You do need to leave the base computer on and connected to a TV signal source like cable or an antenna.

The video can be streamed to any computer or laptop and played back on Windows Media Player or Real Networks' RealPlayer software. It's not the same quality that you would see on your TV, but it's as good as most of the streaming video out there.

Since I have cable TV service, I was also able to watch a live Big

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Ten tournament basketball game on ESPN at work. When my editor approached, I hit the "record" button and watched parts of the game later when he went away.

An important feature was that I did not have to install any special software on my work computer. Orb officials say the program is also designed to work on selected cell phones and PDAs.

Orb also worked on an Apple Macintosh iBook G4 laptop. I did have to download a copy of Windows Media Player 9.

Orb isn't alone in trying to pioneer a new TV watching concept called "space shifting." TiVo Inc. has been offering a feature that allows users to upload shows recorded on a TiVo box to a laptop.

And San Mateo's Sling Media Inc. later this year plans to market a \$249 device that sends live or recorded video to a remote computer over the Internet, but without requiring a home computer.

Orb's not perfect. The video can be choppy, depending on network connections, and I couldn't open some video and audio files because their formats weren't supported.

But if you already have the right equipment and just need that TV fix when you're on the road, Orb is relatively inexpensive and easy to use.

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