XBMC vs MythTV

Graham Morrison dims the lights, gets the popcorn and settles down for the Clash of the Linux Media Player Titans.

DATA

MythTV 0.27.1
Web mythtv.org
Developer Isaac Richards
Licence GPLv2

XBMC 13.1
Web http://xbmc.org
Developer Team XBMC
Licence GPLv2

Five or six years ago, coercing desktop Linux into some kind of television recording, music playing, video watching set-top-box was a lifestyle choice. It took so much time and continual effort that you were spared the pain of watching the rubbish you were recording. The main offender was MythTV, an application worthy of the much overused word 'behemoth'. It's a monstrous creature that only time and respect can calm; wonderful and frustrating, complex and powerful in equal dosage.

XBMC isn't a new pretender to the crown, nor is it a direct replacement for MythTV, but it has become a more attractive alternative for many of us. It's also been around for many years, famously taking its name from the Xbox games console it originally subverted, and XBMC is now a very polished, very modular media centre that runs on many different platforms, and it always manages to look great and perform effortlessly. More importantly, it doesn't suffer any of the old analogue cruft that can hold MythTV back. So when both projects pushed out major releases within weeks of each other, we couldn't resist the opportunity to pit them both against one another.

> **"XBMC has been designed to work with third-party recording and scheduling servers."**

Front-end to front-end

MythTV is a complete digital television recording solution that's split into two parts: one part handles the recording hardware and the scheduling of the recordings, while the other part runs on the hardware connected to your television. These are known as the back-end and the front-end respectively, and you can have more than one front-end connected to more than one back-end. The front-end can also be augmented through plugins, and can be made to access your movies, photos, music and other media. This part is most similar to XBMC.

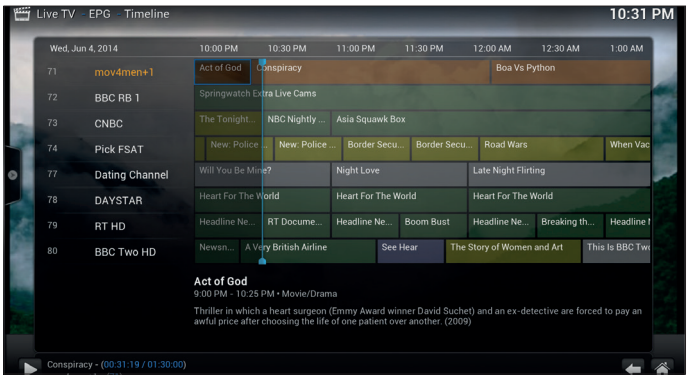
New skins can be downloaded and installed in MythTV, but you may need to reconfigure menus separately.

XBMC can also be expanded through the addition of many plugins, but by default, it will access your photos, movies and music collections through a television-friendly interface. While it doesn't offer the same functionality as MythTV's back-end directly, XBMC has been designed to work with third-party recording and scheduling servers that turn it into a fully fledged television recording solution. One of those servers can even be the MythTV back-end, if that's not too confusing, although most people have migrated away to TVheadend.

One of the biggest problems with MythTV is configuring the back-end. You need to get your hardware working, navigate database configuration and permissions and understand the nature of the broadcasts that you want to capture. There's no one-click option for Freeview or Freesat in the UK, for example, and there's very little help within the tools.

Hardware decoding

All of which leads us to XBMC and MythTV's front-ends. Both can be installed with very little fuss and very few dependencies. Thanks to XBMC's popularity, and the fact it originated on a system with a decent



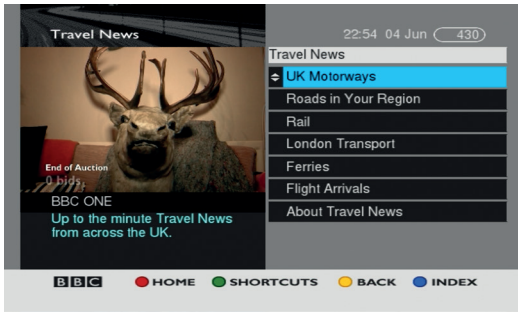
MythTV (left) can look very good, but XBMC always seems to look better – mainly thanks to its composited and unified rendering engine.

Live TV

MythTV has the ability to play live TV at its core, while XMBC can add much of the same functionality through a plugin (we tested both the TVheadend and Mythtvback-end PVR back-ends). Navigating the plugins list can be tricky, and we encountered a bug in XBMC that enabled both plugins by mistake, but everything else worked. Pausing, rewinding and live recording on both XBMC and MythTV is almost identical, with XBMC having the advantage of a clearer interface.

We've previously run MythTV for many years, and its scheduling and recording stability is peerless. But after a few months with XBMC and Tvheadend, we've encountered a few stability issues. Sometimes the connection to the back-end will be lost without reason, especially when rewinding through a remote buffer, and there feels more of a performance hit when you access the back-end over a network, but it still works well. We've watched and recorded SD and HD streams with stereo and multichannel audio, and both work excellently.

One area in which XBMC really excels is with the integration of live video within the EPG and channel selector. The accelerated UI makes short work of scaling the video into a thumbnail, or compositing it behind the EPG, and MythTV can't touch it for these features, which becomes an important feature if you're using one of these as your main TV. XBMC also works much better in windowed mode, which is essential if you're watching on your desktop while doing some work.



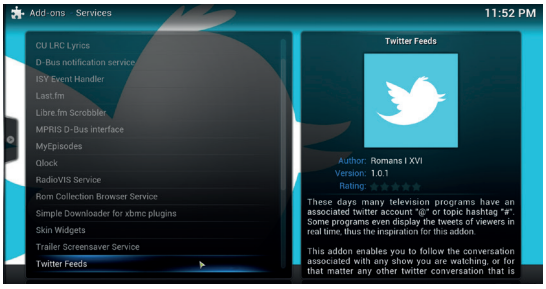
MythTV supports interactive television in the UK, which may make the choice between them easier to make.

graphics card but only a 733 MHz CPU, it's always been able to make best use of graphics acceleration. It works well with OpenELEC running on a Raspberry Pi, for instance, and we've had a great experience running the latest builds on the Matrix ARM mini-PC, although those builds are curated and customised by Matrix themselves to make best use of the hardware. Version 13 also adds hardware decoding to a variety of Android device, most notably the Amazon Fire TV and the OUYA, so a diminutive, silent ARM-powered media player is a definite possibility with XBMC. MythTV's hardware deciding isn't so advanced. There's none for the Raspberry Pi and we've had little success trying to create custom builds ourselves. This restricts the front-end to being an HTPC or a laptop, or possibly a SteamBox if you're going to play Linux games anyway.

Hey good lookin'

Getting around the interface of each depends on the skin being used. XBMC's default has set the standard in GUI navigation for a television, and once you get your head around its quirks and pseudo file-system approach to navigation, it's easy to understand and use. With decent hardware acceleration, even the Raspberry Pi can conjure up 1920x1080 composited pixels of video. MythTV's user-interface has had something of an overhaul with recent versions, and we think this is thanks to competition from XBMC. MythUI is the framework, and it now takes advantage of OpenGL and Qt accelerated rendering. The results can be excellent, and our favourite theme – MythAeon – takes inspiration from XBMC's original skin. But it's more detached from playback than XBMC, which can composite the video behind the GUI or access many of the same user-interface elements whilst playing media. XBMC is also much better at juggling the video resolution with the native resolution of your display, which helps dramatically with font quality and on-screen rendering.

Having used both extensively over the last couple of weeks, and having previously been big fans of all things MythTV, we're surprised and slightly saddened at just how much better XBMC has become. It works on more hardware, it's more accelerated and looks and behaves much more seamlessly. Its plugin architecture and playback options are easier to understand and it general feels much more modern. MythTV has the slight edge when it comes to scheduling and stability, but that can be solved by using the MythTV back-end with XBMC. All things considered, there's no contest. XBMC has won.



Apart from its appearance, the best thing about XBMC is the number of plugins that can be added to make your system even more awesome.

LINUX VOICE VERDICT

XBMC It's got a 3D user-interface. It's got more plugins that you'll ever need, and it runs on anything.

★★★★★

MythTV Hasn't developed rapidly enough to meet the competition, and while still unrivalled for stability, it's getting left behind.

★★★☆☆