

Chapter 1

All about Windows XP Media Center Edition

In This Chapter

- ▶ Comparing MCE with regular XP
- ▶ Taking a tour of the Media Center interface
- ▶ Connecting to a big-screen TV and audio system
- ▶ Buying a Media Center PC

*W*indows XP Media Center Edition 2004. It's a long name, so we're going to call it just *MCE* most of the time. But it's also a descriptive name. Let's break it down into its constituent parts, shall we?

- ✓ **Windows:** Yep, it's a Microsoft Operating System (OS), so it works on PCs using Intel or similar AMD chips and motherboards, the main components of a PC. But (and this is an important *but*), not all standard Windows PCs can run MCE. You need a special PC that meets the rigorous requirements of MCE — you can't just install MCE on your existing PC.
- ✓ **XP:** This is the latest version of Windows (released in 2002), with an improved user interface (it's a lot more colorful), greater performance (it goes faster), and increased reliability.
- ✓ **Media Center Edition:** Not only can MCE computers do all the normal computing stuff that any version of Windows XP can do — Web surfing, e-mail, report writing, and so on — but Microsoft has added enhanced functionality for managing, editing, and playing back various forms of electronic media such as TV, movies, music, home video, and digital photographs.
- ✓ **2004:** This is the most recent edition of the Windows XP MCE platform, and this book contains all the latest and greatest info about what you need to know. We're part of the beta team for the MCE platform, so you're getting the straight scoop here!

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What's new in 2004?

Before Windows XP MCE 2004, there was one prior version, the original XP MCE 2002 program. Some of the improvements in the 2004 version follow:

- ✓ New online capabilities with the Online Spotlight module, so you can access online media without leaving the Media Center interface
- ✓ A new radio tuner interface (and related hardware) that lets you listen to FM radio stations on your MCE PC and buffer up to 30 minutes of live radio for playback later
- ✓ The capability to record CDs to your hard drive directly in the Media Center interface instead of using Windows Media Player
- ✓ Enhanced 16:9 support to take advantage of the new TV screen acreage provided by today's latest wide-screen TVs
- ✓ The capability to prioritize your scheduled TV recordings, in case of a conflict
- ✓ Advanced photo management that enables you to view slide shows as well as reduce red-eye, adjust contrast, rotate, and zoom your favorite pictures in MCE

Beyond these changes, the folks at Microsoft have spent a lot of time making general improvements and upgrades so that MCE works faster and more reliably. They've also completed some serious work on the TV capabilities of MCE PCs, with a bunch of new software upgrades that make the MCE experience look even better when you hook up your MCE PC to your big-screen TV.

This is just the tip of the iceberg. There'll be so many ooohs and ahhhhs emanating from your living room, you'd swear the Temptations joined the party.

Media management and display are at the heart of MCE. Its full-screen interface and handheld remote control enable you to sit across the room and use the MCE PC like a piece of gear from your home theater. MCE takes the PC to a whole new realm — and may very well take the PC to a whole new *room* — in your house.

Everything about Windows XP Media Center Edition is special, advanced, enhanced, entranced, romanced . . . geez we can get carried away! It's that neat.

What's Special about XP Media Center Edition?

An MCE PC is a high-end machine, with more features and faster processors than regular Windows PCs, as well as some specialized parts for media functionality. The only big differences you might notice, however, are the screen

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(which is usually larger), the larger and more powerful speakers, and perhaps the general speediness of the machine. (MCE PCs have the fastest Pentium processors and the biggest, baddest graphics chips in existence — we talk about these in Chapter 2.)



You can't add MCE software (the MCE OS, in other words) to just any old PC. In fact, *you* can't add it to any PC you own, even if the PC meets all the equipment and performance criteria we're about to discuss. Microsoft doesn't sell MCE this way. Primarily for reasons of reliability and performance, Microsoft has decided that MCE will be available only preinstalled on PCs that meet its minimum specifications. This requirement creates a known environment in which Microsoft can do its operating system magic, without trying to make MCE compatible with the millions of equipment permutations that more general versions of Windows must deal with.

The first time you fire up an MCE PC, it will probably look like any other Windows XP PC. You'll see the standard XP desktop interface, with the big green Start menu at the bottom left.

You can ignore the MCE features and use your MCE PC as a high-powered PC. You can surf the Web using Internet Explorer or your Web browser of choice. You can check e-mail with Outlook Express. If you have Microsoft Office installed, you can work on that spreadsheet of widgets or write that overdue paper (or, in our case, book).

But if you look on the desktop or between the sofa cushions, you'll see a shiny new remote control, as shown in Figure 1-1. If you've already installed your MCE PC, go ahead and press the start button. (It's the green button in the middle of the remote.) The start button launches the Media Center interface, which is designed to let you sit away from your computer and use it as an entertainment device, not a data terminal.

We can't guarantee that your remote will look exactly like the one in Figure 1-1. But somewhere on your remote you *will* find the arrow buttons, the OK button, and the Start button.

The first time you open Media Center on your MCE PC, it prompts you to go through a 10- to 15-minute process of setting preferences. If you want to do this now, skip ahead to Chapter 7, where we describe this process.



You might be tempted to cancel out of this process and go straight into the Media Center Start menu with the factory default settings in place. We *do not* recommend skipping the Media Center Set-up Wizard. Your TV programming guide will not be installed, your remote control may not work to change channels on your set-top box, and other features may simply not function. Complete the wizard. (Patience, patience.)

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Figure 1-1:
Sit on the
sofa and
control your
MCE PC.

The Media Center Interface

The Media Center interface, shown in Figure 1-2, is the key to using MCE — it's what differentiates MCE from plain Windows XP. The Media Center interface is designed for “lean back” computer use. The text on the screen is big and can be read easily while you sit in your comfy chair across the room.

The Media Center interface does away with many of the normal Windows interface systems that require a mouse. For example, you won't find the pull-down menus that normal Windows XP (and XP applications) use in its menu bar. In fact, you won't find a menu bar (or a Start button) at all. Everything is laid out in a linear and hierarchical manner for ease of use with a remote control (though you can use your mouse as well, if you want).

Pretty much everything you'll ever want to do with MCE can be accomplished with the four arrow, or directional, buttons on the remote (up, down, left, and right) and the OK button. The MCE was designed for the remote control, not the keyboard. In fact, some things are downright hard to do without the remote control, such as access the More Info data about a movie.

To select a menu item, use the arrow buttons to reach the menu item (it becomes highlighted in green), and then press the OK button.

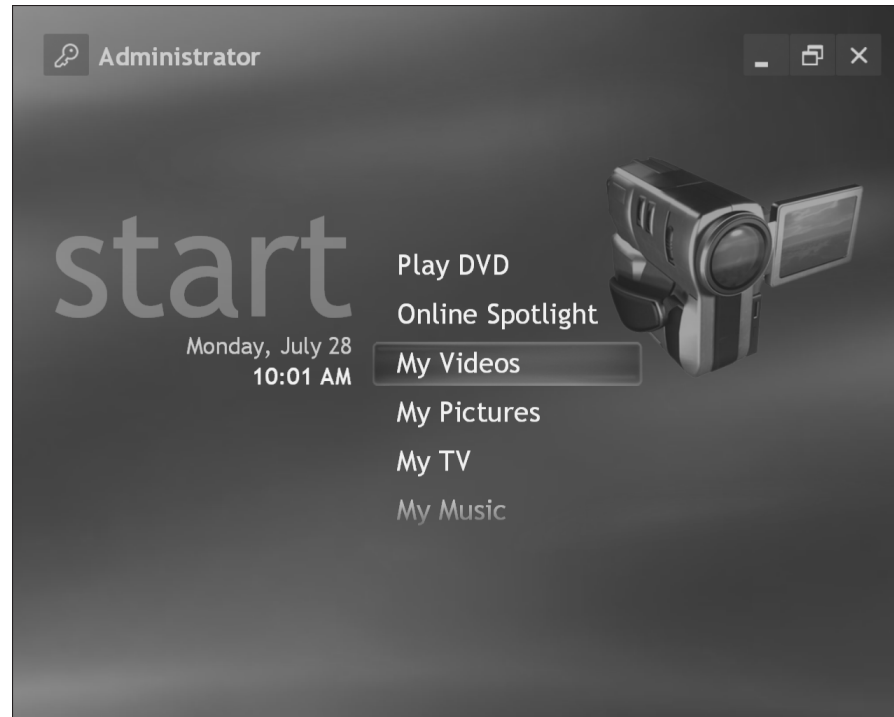


Figure 1-2:
Everything
in MCE
starts here.

If a menu item has choices below it, they appear when you select the main menu item. To select one of the subitems, simply use the arrow buttons to reach it, and press the OK button.

Want to look at that neat TV image in the little window to the side? No problem. Use the arrow buttons to reach the image (it becomes highlighted in green) and press OK. Now you're watching TV. Cool.

The Media Center interface is a lot like the interface you might see when digging around in the setup menus on a TV or a home-theater receiver attached to a TV, except that MCE is a lot more user friendly. We will now boldly predict that it will take you all of two minutes of messing around with the arrow buttons and the OK button to get the hang of making choices in MCE.



If you ever get lost in the Media Center interface, start pressing the Back button on the remote. You'll eventually return to the top of the menu hierarchy — the interface shown in Figure 1-2.

In the remainder of this section, we talk in general terms about what each choice — we call them *modules* — on the main MCE page is all about. In Part III, we describe each one in detail, telling you how it works and how you can get the most out of it.

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What Media Center can't do today — but will do soon!

Microsoft is in the second iteration of Media Center Edition, and it's adding features as fast as it can. Here are a few that we hope it adds soon:

- ✓ Devices that let you remotely display your MCE interface on TVs and other displays, so you can control and use your MCE PC from anywhere in the home
- ✓ Devices that let you use the MCE wirelessly, without making Ethernet or other connections
- ✓ More support for online gaming
- ✓ The capability to create (burn) CDs and DVDs directly from the Media Center interface
- ✓ More options for purchasing and downloading online content (such as music) in the Media Center interface

Read Chapter 18 to find out more about the future functions and features of MCE.

My TV module

One of the coolest things that every MCE PC can do is help you watch television. And we're not just talking about watching TV the old-fashioned way — sitting in front of that glowing box, waiting like a sheep for a show to come on. Nope, MCE lets you move into the future and take control of your TV habit. (Admit it, you have a TV habit — everyone does!) All you have to do is select the My TV module in MCE.

With MCE, you can do the following TV stuff:

- ✓ Watch live TV (the old-fashioned way) on your computer monitor or on a TV hooked up to your MCE PC
- ✓ Keep track of what's on, and what *will* be on, with an on-screen program guide
- ✓ Record and play back broadcast TV programs at your convenience

This last feature is perhaps the most compelling. After all, you can watch TV on any old \$199 box from the warehouse store. And if you have a satellite dish or digital cable, you probably have an on-screen program guide. But MCE includes a full-featured *PVR* (personal video recorder) with just about all the functions of the TiVo or ReplayTV device that a small number of TV-crazy folks have in their homes.

Like those other PVRs, MCE dispenses with the bulky and inconvenient tapes that VCRs use and instead records TV digitally on a computer hard drive. The advantages over a regular VCR are immense. In addition to storing a ton of TV

shows, you can use the PVR function of MCE to pause, rewind, and fast forward live TV while you're watching it.

No longer do you have to rely on broadcasters for timing your snack and bathroom breaks. Press a button and walk away — when you come back, catch up where you left off. Or watch that last-second three-pointer again, right now, without waiting for Dickie V. and the boys in the ESPN truck to cue up the replay.

Figure 1-3 shows the main My TV interface. We talk about how to use it in much more detail in Chapter 9.

Radio module

Newer MCE PCs have begun to ship with an FM radio tuner that does for radio what My TV does for TV: gives you control over what you listen to and when. With the MCE Radio module, shown in Figure 1-4, you can use the MCE interface and the remote control to tune in to your favorite stations, and pause and record live radio broadcasts.



Figure 1-3:
Find your
favorite
shows
and watch
or record
them here.

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Figure 1-4:
Tune in
to Rush
Limbaugh or
Limp Bizkit
with your
MCE Radio
module.

You can run to the kitchen for some more mineral water (or whatever your beverage preference) while your favorite talk show drones on. On your return, you can pick up listening where you left off. The Radio module can record up to 30 minutes of live radio. Like any digital radio, the Radio module lets you scan for stations or directly enter the frequency of the station you want to tune to. You can also set up presets, so you can quickly find and tune to your favorite stations.

My Music module

Because you're interested in buying an MCE PC or have already bought one, we bet you're already into the PC music world. If you're not, are you in for a treat. People have been recording their favorite music on their PCs for years now — and online music download systems such as Napster (now dead and gone) and Kazaa (www.kazaa.com) have received tons of press (and lawsuits) as people share music online (illegally). Now legal downloading options such as a new version of Napster and the Rhapsody Music Service (www.listen.com) are taking off as well.

In other words, computer-based music is an official BIG DEAL. And the MCE My Music module makes handling music easy, no matter how many albums and songs you have on your computer. Figure 1-5 shows My Music's main menu.

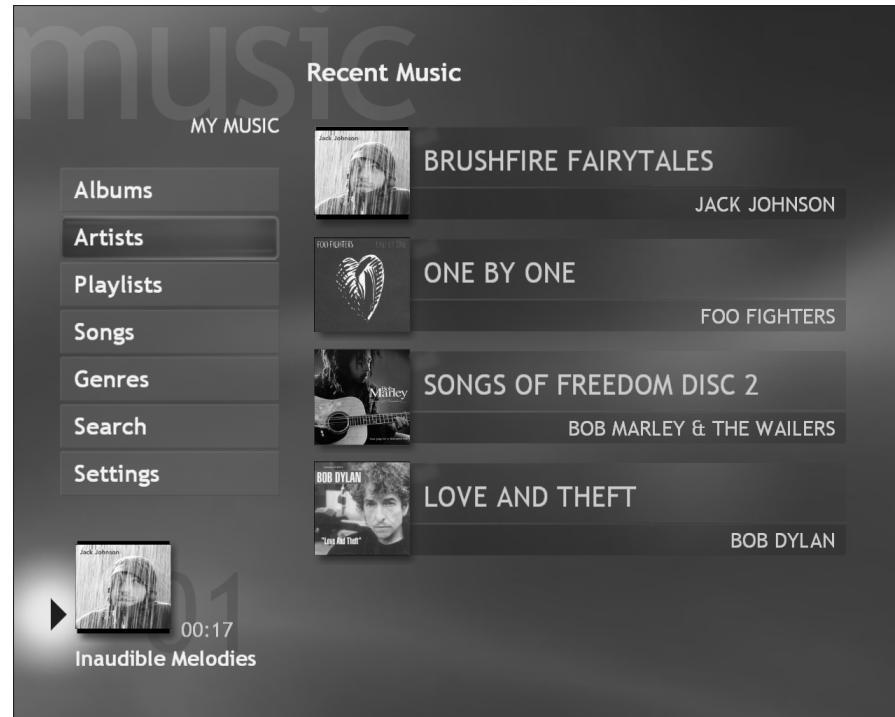


Figure 1-5:
Access
all your
music here.

My Music lets you do several things:

- ✓ **Organize your music:** You can navigate your music collection by sorting your MP3 files, Windows Media files, and CDs by song title, album title, and artist. You can categorize your music by genre (such as rock, punk, and blues) and create playlists of favorite songs.
- ✓ **Search for music:** If you have a *ton* of music on your MCE PC (we do!), you can easily search for a song, an artist, or an album name using the remote control or the keyboard.
- ✓ **Copy CDs to the MCE PC hard drive:** Adding your favorite CDs to your music collection is dead simple with your MCE PC — just a few presses on the remote, and your CD's audio tracks are downloaded to your MCE hard drive. In addition, the song titles, album title, and even the CD cover art are downloaded automatically from databases on the Internet. Not bad.
- ✓ **Buy music online:** Pressing a button on your remote automatically sends you to a Web page (outside the MCE interface) that lets you buy more music from a particular artist.

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And, of course, you can use My Music to play back music through the speakers attached to your MCE PC or through your stereo or home-theater system, if you have one attached to your MCE PC.

Windows XP Media Center Edition makes use of Microsoft's powerful Media Player 9 functionality — Microsoft's standalone music software. Windows Media Player 9 is one of the few examples of something you *can't* access from the Media Center interface. Sorry, but you'll have to grab your wireless keyboard and mouse and tap away in the normal Windows XP interface to load your music onto your MCE PC. Then you can jump back into Media Center to organize and play your music. We tell you more about Media Player 9 and how to hook up your stereo to your MCE PC in Chapter 5 and how to take advantage of your My Music module in Chapter 10.

My Pictures module

Digital cameras have revolutionized the world of picture taking. No longer do you have to wait for your pictures — not even the One Hour Photo shop is fast enough compared to digital photography. Snap a picture, plug your camera into your MCE PC, and instant gratification. Can't beat that, huh?

Although you can download digital pictures to just about any PC, MCE's My Pictures module makes it even easier to deal with your photographic art (or poorly composed snapshots). With My Pictures, you can

- ✓ View any pictures you've downloaded from your camera to your MCE PC's My Pictures folder (the default folder for downloaded pictures). Pictures can be viewed in full-screen mode, zoomed, and *panned* (meaning you can zoom in on certain segments of the picture and then move your view around to other zoomed parts of the picture).
- ✓ View pictures stored on removable media such as Compact Flash or SmartMedia cards, the "digital film" used by many digital cameras. Many MCE PCs have built-in readers for this type of media; you can also add media readers through your USB port.
- ✓ Watch slide shows of your favorite pictures on the MCE PC monitor or your TV. You can even add your favorite background music from My Music.
- ✓ Correct pictures, so that those poorly composed and lit snapshots look like something your megabuck wedding photographer took. My Pictures can automatically analyze and optimize your photos.
- ✓ Print your pictures with just a few presses of the remote.
- ✓ Adjust brightness (resuscitate those dark pictures) and remove red-eye (so long, Terminator).

Figure 1-6 shows the My Pictures main menu. We delve into the digital darkroom and your MCE PC in Chapter 11.

My Videos module

If you have kids — Danny's got four, so he's speaking from experience here — you have a video camera. Or three video cameras. And if you're like most amateur videographers, you have three good minutes buried in a ten-minute tape that also includes footage of your feet, the back of your spouse's head, and one blinding close-up of the sun. MCE comes to your rescue with the My Videos module, shown in Figure 1-7.

My Videos lets you store your videos on your MCE PC's hard drive just like any other kind of media file. All MCE PCs come with USB, USB 2.0, and FireWire 1394 (we explain these systems in Chapter 3), which enable you to connect your digital camcorder to your MCE PC and import your video.

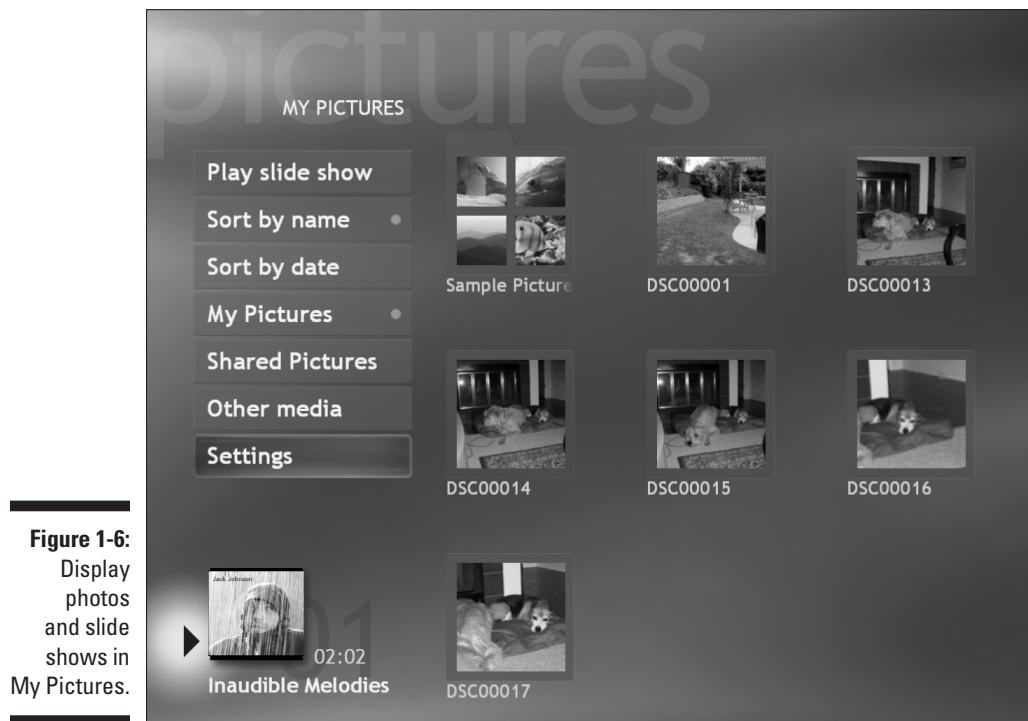


Figure 1-6:
Display
photos
and slide
shows in
My Pictures.

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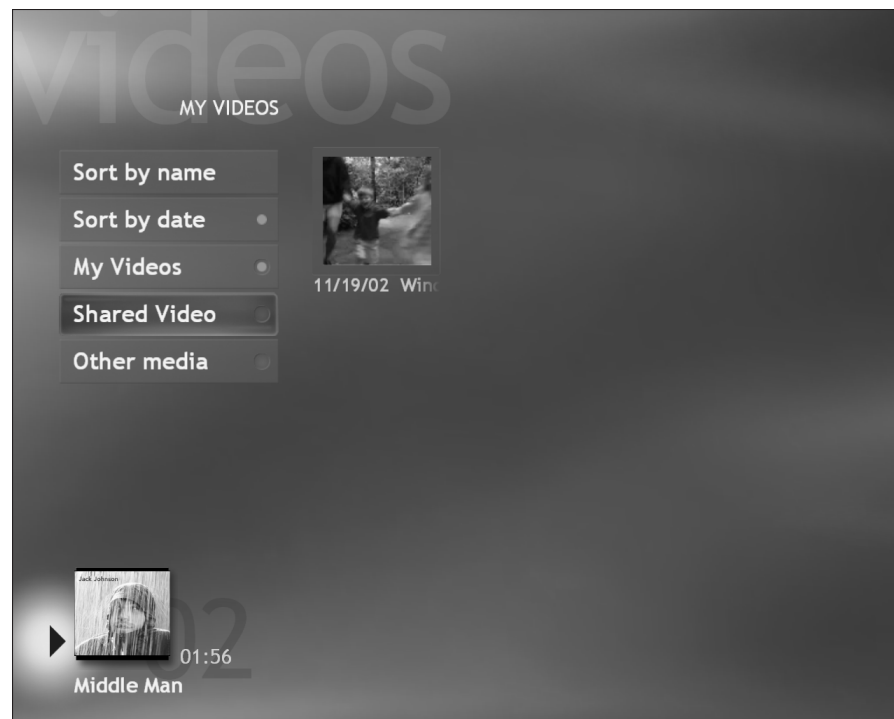


Figure 1-7:
Break out
the wine
and cheese,
we're
watching
home
videos in
My Videos.

Media Center PCs include a cool Microsoft program called Windows Movie Maker 2 that lets you edit and combine video clips into finished videos for playback later. My Videos then lets you organize and watch these videos on your computer monitor or TV.



To use Windows Movie Maker 2, you need to exit the Media Center interface and work in the regular Windows XP interface. After you've saved your masterpiece, you can jump back into Media Center to organize and play your movies.

Play DVD module

Just as PVRs (mentioned in the “My TV” section) have pretty much made the VCR obsolete for recording TV programming, DVDs (digital video discs) have made the old VCR into the video equivalent of a buggy whip for playing back prerecorded movies. And now that many people have begun to buy their own DVD recorders, DVDs can even be created at home.

Well, MCE didn't miss the boat when it comes to the DVD — all MCE PCs have a DVD player, and MCE itself includes the Play DVD module.

Play DVD lets you do the following:

- ✓ Play DVDs on your MCE's monitor or your TV
- ✓ Play DVDs in a window while you're doing other things with your MCE PC
- ✓ Access detailed information about a DVD (title, length, rating, and so on)
- ✓ Turn on parental controls to keep the kids from watching *Memento* when they should be watching *SpongeBob SquarePants*.
- ✓ Stretch, zoom, and letterbox your DVD to best fit the size and shape of your TV

Play DVD also unleashes the powerful video graphics chip in your MCE PC to provide a high-resolution, non-interlaced display of your DVDs. (If that makes no sense and you have a DVD in hand, candles lit, and a date on the way over, hurry up and skip ahead to Chapter 12!)

Online Spotlight module

Perhaps the biggest leap forward in Windows XP Media Center Edition 2004 is the addition of Mediacenter.com online content into the Media Center interface. The Online Spotlight module of the Media Center interface lets you use your Internet connection to do the following:

- ✓ Keep up with the latest in Media Center news, tips, and tricks
- ✓ Watch movie trailers and keep up to date on movie news
- ✓ Listen to hundreds of Internet radio stations
- ✓ Download music, movies, and photographs

In previous versions of MCE, you had to do all online activities in the regular XP interface (up close and personal to your PC, using your mouse). Online Spotlight uses a special interface designed — like the rest of the Media Center interface — for viewing and remote control from across the room. This means you can sit back and use your remote control to browse and use online content.

We can't show you a picture of Online Spotlight because Microsoft and its partners were still putting the finishing touches on this module when we sent the book to the printers. But we've used beta versions of Online Spotlight, and trust us — it's really cool.



Online Spotlight content — like any online content — is best experienced when using a broadband Internet connection such as DSL or a cable modem. We talk about these connections more in Chapter 6. Trust us on this. If you're shelling out more than a thousand bucks on an MCE PC, it's worthwhile to spend a few extra bucks a month on a fast Internet connection.

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Big Screen and Big Sound, All over the House

For many users, MCE PC is the primary means of viewing and listening to content. In other words, many people use the MCE PC's computer monitor and computer speakers to watch and listen to digital media. This works great if your MCE PC is in your dorm room or home office.

But if you're like us and have your MCE PC installed in your family room or home theater or media room, you might want to branch out to a bigger display. Well, MCE has you covered, because one key attribute of all MCE PCs is that you can connect them to a big-screen TV and a home audio system for a bigger, faster, and louder media experience. All MCE PCs have video outputs and analog or digital audio outputs that can drive your TV and audio system to new heights! We talk about the hardware specifics in Chapter 2.

We highly recommend that you connect your MCE PC to your TV and audio system. (Danny has his MCE PC hooked up to his InFocus projector TV system, so he can watch MCE videos and DVDs on a really, really big screen.)

Media Center PCs also come with built-in Ethernet cards, so you can connect the MCE PC to a home network. We talk about the basics of wired home-networking options in Chapter 15 and wireless options in Chapter 16. For the details on installing a home network, see our books *Smart Homes For Dummies* or *Wireless Home Networking For Dummies* (both published by Wiley Publishing, Inc.).

In the future, we expect Microsoft to announce a lot of cool new products that will take advantage of home networks. In particular, we think that MCE PC will soon be used as the *media server*, enabling you to access MCE PC-stored media from all sorts of devices and places in your home.

Where to Get Your Media Center PC

Buying a *Media Center PC* (that's what PC makers call them) is easy. Microsoft and its partners have taken the guesswork out of the process by creating PCs that meet all MCE requirements.

More cool MCE 2004 features

As they say on TV, “But wait — there’s more!” Microsoft squeezed a lot of cool little new features in the 2004 release of Media Center Edition. We discussed a few of the big ones previously in this chapter, in the “What’s new in 2004?” sidebar. Some of the other features that we think make the upgrade to 2004 worthwhile include the following:

- ✔ **Active Accessibility 2.0:** Improved accessibility for folks who need help with reading, hearing, or physically accessing their MCE PC.
- ✔ **Display Calibration Wizard:** Provides an improved experience for setting up your TV to work with MCE.
- ✔ **Set-top box learning mode:** Makes it easier to connect different TV set-top boxes to the MCE PC.
- ✔ **Automatic digital media library synchronization:** MCE automatically searches for media on your MCE PC or network.
- ✔ **Phone call notification:** On MCE PCs with the right hardware (modem), caller ID information appears on your TV or MCE PC display.
- ✔ **High-contrast schemes:** The colors on the screen have been redesigned for easier reading from across the room.
- ✔ **Automatic Guide updates:** MCE can automatically download program guide information, whenever your computer is connected to the Internet.
- ✔ **Record on or around:** For programs that infuriatingly start a minute or two early (or end late), you can adjust MCE to start or stop recording early or late.
- ✔ **Enhanced record history:** Media Center keeps track of all recorded TV and lets you know what happened if there was a mistake — so you don’t make it again
- ✔ **Now Playing (music):** No matter what function of Media Center you’re using, you’ll always see an on-screen display of the music you’re listening to
- ✔ **Guide filtering:** MCE lets you filter the TV program guide by categories — so you can show, for example, all movies or all sporting events
- ✔ **Silent Personal Video Recording (PVR) functionality:** Media Center will wake your MCE PC from standby to record schedule shows and will leave the audio and video displays off so that recording doesn’t interfere with other work you’re doing on the MCE PC
- ✔ **Auto-playlists:** MCE automatically creates music playlists based on your listening habits
- ✔ **Full-screen visualizations:** MCE visualizations (the cool screen effects that correspond to music you are listening to) are now full-screen.
- ✔ **Print pictures:** You can print pictures directly in Media Center, without going into the traditional Windows XP interface.

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You can get a Media Center PC from the following vendors:

- ✓ **ABS Computer Technologies** (www.abspc.com)
- ✓ **Cyberpower System** (www.cyberpowersystem.com)
- ✓ **Dell** (www.dell.com)
- ✓ **Gateway** (www.gateway.com)
- ✓ **HP** (www.shopping.hp.com)
- ✓ **iBuypower** (www.ibuypower.com)
- ✓ **MIND Computer Products** (www.mind.ca)
- ✓ **Northgate** (www.northgate.com)
- ✓ **Sony** (www.sony.com)
- ✓ **Tagar Systems** (www.tagarsystems.com)
- ✓ **Toshiba** (csd.toshiba.com)
- ✓ **Touch Systems** (www.touch-systems.ca)
- ✓ **Viewsonic** (www.viewsonic.com)
- ✓ **ZT Group** (www.ztgroup.com)

Microsoft works with a lot of different computer vendors, so this list will change (mainly with the addition of other manufacturers). For an update on who's making Media Center PCs, go to Microsoft's MCE home page, where you'll find links to all current vendors:

www.microsoft.com/windowsxp/mediacenter/default.asp

For more on where to get MCE PCs and how to buy them, see Chapter 3.