The best streaming device to buy right now

Buying a capable streaming player for your TV is easier and cheaper in 2020 than it’s ever been. So long as you’re willing to spend at least $50, you can buy something that’ll deliver 4K resolution and HDR color from apps like Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, and Disney+. With universal search that spans all of the big services, streaming players make it easy to find something to watch when you finally make it to the couch after a long day.

If you’ve got a fairly new 4K TV at home, you might not see the need for a set-top box or streaming stick; it’s probably already got many of your essential apps preloaded and ready to go. If you’re satisfied with what’s there, no one’s forcing you to buy an extra gadget. But app selection can differ between TV brands, so if you want *everything* under the sun, a streaming player is a great way to fill in those gaps. Another advantage is speed: if you find the apps on your TV sluggish to use, a speedy Roku or Fire TV might help alleviate that frustration. And sometimes companies will end development of an app for older TVs, but you can bet that updates will continue long into the future for the streaming box equivalent.

Roku’s Streaming Stick Plus and Premiere have the features and apps you need for an unbeatable price.
Photo by Chris Welch / The Verge

1. Roku Streaming Stick Plus / **Roku**

Premiere

The best streaming media player for most people

Roku is the best streaming player for people who want a no-nonsense device with a simple interface and far-reaching universal search across many different entertainment services. Roku’s keep-it-simple home screen, though not flashy, is fully customizable and lets you put the streaming apps you use most right at the top for quick access.

Thanks to the bundled long-range wireless receiver, the Streaming Stick Plus has better Wi-Fi performance than the majority of Roku’s lineup, which can prove useful if your TV and router are far apart. It also comes with a voice remote, whereas the Premiere only includes Roku’s basic remote without voice search. (If you want the better remote and the Premiere box, Walmart exclusively sells the Premiere Plus.) If your TV is mounted to the wall, the Streaming Stick Plus’ more discreet design will be the better option.

Verge Score 8.5 out of 10

But otherwise, the Stick Plus and Premiere are basically identical: they both give you 4K HDR picture, are snappy and responsive to use, and have what feels like an endless catalog of apps to pick from. Though it has shied away from a big redesign of its basic app icon grid, Roku also keeps improving upon its software: the ad-supported Roku Channel offers free TV shows and movies, and there’s now a dedicated kids section for surfacing family-friendly content. Roku’s home screen also has a “featured free” section that highlights content from multiple apps that can be watched without any subscription.

Verge Score 8 out of 10

The Roku devices lack support for Dolby Vision, but general HDR support means you still get the vivid colors and bright explosions that help movies and shows pop off the screen. And since there are so many existing Roku customers out there, companies often prioritize the platform when launching new streaming services or bringing new features to existing ones. Then there are the small touches, like a universal search that prioritizes saving you money (by ranking free-to-stream results higher) and the ability to privately listen to TV audio using Roku's smartphone app. These things, combined with the intuitive software experience, help keep the company's gadgets at the top of our recommended list.

However, it's worth nothing that Roku's platform is currently missing HBO Max, as the company has been unable to reach an agreement with WarnerMedia that satisfies both sides. (You can still watch HBO, thankfully.) Both Roku and Amazon have increasingly been getting into these spats with content owners.

It's more pricey than the competition, but the Apple TV 4K offers a top-notch user experience.
Photo by Chris Welch / The Verge

The best streaming media player for people who want the premium experience

The Apple TV 4K checks off all of the key boxes — 4K, HDR, Dolby Vision, HDR10, and Dolby Atmos audio — and doesn't have

any obvious holes in its selection of third-party apps. Its user experience feels more modern than Roku’s and is no less intuitive. And for those in the Apple ecosystem, it offers benefits like AirPlay and free 4K upgrades for movies you’ve purchased from Apple in the past. Plus, there are no ugly ads on the home screen. It now also features Apple Arcade, letting you pick up where you left off with the same games you’re playing on your iPhone or iPad. Despite being over two years old, the Apple TV 4K remains lightning-quick in day-to-day use.

However, this far into its life cycle, the Apple TV 4K’s price can be hard to swallow. It costs considerably more than a Roku or Fire TV, but purely from an entertainment standpoint, Apple’s streamer doesn’t do much to justify the $100 premium. If you’re a privacy-minded person, it’s worth knowing that Apple is less invasive about tracking your streaming habits compared to some of its competitors. Roku and Amazon, in particular, both extensively track what you’re watching and how you interact with their products.

With the next big tvOS update coming this fall, you’ll finally be able to watch YouTube at 4K resolution on the Apple TV 4K. Previously, YouTube had maxed out at 1080p, but Apple finally relented and will begin supporting Google’s preferred VP9 codec this year. It’s good to see that what had been a significant downside for the device is being resolved.

But you’re still stuck with the Siri remote, which remains a source of frustration for some Apple TV owners and is in need of a redesign.

Verge Score 8 out of 10

The Fire TV Cube combines a streaming player and Alexa speaker into one device.
Photo by Chris Welch / The Verge

The best streaming media player if you don’t already have a smart speaker

The 2019 Amazon Fire TV Cube (now with Dolby Vision) is a convenient hybrid device that’s one part Alexa smart speaker, one part streaming player. It’s capable of hands-free voice commands, letting you jump right into your favorite shows without picking up the remote. It’s also able to control your TV, soundbar, and even some cable boxes with those same voice controls.

Verge Score 8.5 out of 10

If you’re not a fan of Roku, Amazon’s Fire TV Stick 4K is the next best option for an inexpensive streaming player.
Photo by Chris Welch / The Verge

Best inexpensive alternative to Roku

If you don’t need your streaming player to double as an Alexa speaker, the Fire TV Stick 4K is a solid alternative to Roku’s players. As you’d expect, Amazon puts a big emphasis on content that’s included free with a Prime subscription. But

the app selection is more or less at par with Roku and Apple — again, minus HBO Max at the moment — and the Fire TV 4K supports Dolby Vision and Dolby Atmos audio for a relatively low price.

Verge Score 8 out of 10

Nvidia’s Shield TV is a powerful Android TV streaming box that’s popular with home theater enthusiasts.
Photo by Chris Welch / The Verge

Best streaming media player for gamers

Whether you want to stream the latest games through GeForce Now or load up a ton of emulators and ROMs, the Nvidia Shield TV has you covered. With its interesting tube-shaped design, this Android TV-based device is also a good pick for home theater enthusiasts thanks to an impressive 4K upscaling feature that can make your movies and shows look sharper and more detailed. Both the Shield TV and the more expensive Shield TV Pro (which has more memory and USB connectivity) are blazing fast and a pleasure to use even if you don’t intend to use every feature on offer.

Verge Score 8 out of 10

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