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Intel slowly building digital home networks
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INTEL Corp. is continuing its push toward the digital home entertainment space with plans on innovative ways to distribute data across homes.

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The start of 2006 saw Intel making bold moves toward the consumer electronics space with a new logo, new marketing thrust and a new home entertainment platform called "ViiV."

ViiV boxes are made by original equipment manufacturers based on hardware and software specs from Intel. ViiV aims to connect various home consumer electronics gadgets such as the television, game consoles, audio and video players to the Internet, with the ViiV box acting as a nerve system for all the digital entertainment data being routed through the home network. This would include digital movies, audio, photos, games and Internet content. All of these would be managed by the ViiV appliance with the TV and the remote control acting as output and input devices.

However, one problem with the digital home setup is the availability of a high-speed network inside homes. Broadband is traditionally delivered to the home via the coaxial cable or Ethernet port from a computer which is already connected to the Internet.

There are about 250 million homes worldwide with broadband, according to Intel's estimates. However, most homes have a limited number of cable or telephone jacks where a network could be expanded. Intel is trying to solve this problem through active participation in the HomePlug Powerline Alliance, a consortium of technology and consumer electronics giants that is creating a standard method of distributing data through electric wires.

Creating a network inside homes entails cabling and wiring or setting up wireless access points, but up to now there is no single effective way of distributing data to cover the entire home. But powerlines are found in most homes worldwide, and this could be a potential network route for digital entertainment data throughout every single room in the house. If data could be made to pass through the electrical wiring using a standard protocol, every electrical outlet would become a network access point. This would enable broadband sharing, wi-fi extension and networked entertainment. Every electrical outlet can become like an Ethernet jack or some other network connection point without installing new wires or cables across the home.

Intel envisions digital entertainment data running throughout the home by connecting the broadband gateway to a HomePlug adapter which is plugged into the outlet. You now have an instant network across the home.

"There are now four million HomePlug adapters being used worldwide," said Donald McDonald, vice president for the digital home group at Intel. "This will enable short-range but high-speed and high-performance networks between consumer electronics devices using the electrical outlets."

You can thus use the powerline to network your broadband connection to different devices or extend wi-fi in dead spots across the home by using a wi-fi extension card in the form of a HomePlug adapter. No new wires are needed, just plug in the adapter and the home will become network-enabled.

The HomePlug Powerline Alliance, founded in March, 2000, is backed by industry giants such as

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Intel, Sony, Samsung, Motorola and GE. A standard for distributing data across electrical wiring is now being developed. Others have successfully used the powerline to route data, but proprietary protocols were used so appliances and devices could not effectively communicate using the earlier methods.

This is where ViiV comes in. As Intel pushes its digital home entertainment platform, it hopes to get more OEMs to manufacture products according to the ViiV specification. And with HomePlug, these ViiV-enabled appliances could easily be connected through the electrical wiring network.

The entry of Intel into the consumer electronics market will surely be watched by companies like Sony and Samsung, which are already in a very competitive struggle for market dominance. Enter Intel with its eyes trained on the same market which is increasingly becoming crowded. What happens then when TV manufacturers begin shipping products with ViiV-like capabilities?

"Then I would be very happy," said McDonald. "ViiV is based on open standards and we would encourage consumer electronics suppliers to consider the platform and incorporate ViiV into their products."