

Can you really cut the remote cord with apps?

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It seems like every piece of gear available at Audio Advice has its own app to enable you to control it with your iPad or tablet. Some of these apps are pretty slick looking with just about every feature you can imagine. At home, I have fully integrated remotes in every system with all the functions I need easily accessible. In addition they all have tactile buttons so I can look at the screen and navigate around without having to look where my finger is on a touchscreen.

I decided to see what the experience would be like if I ditched my great remote and used only apps to control the system. I picked my home theater to do the test. I've got a brand new surround sound processor (more about this in a future post) that uses a VNC app to give you a full screen of its front panel. My Oppo Blu-ray player has its own app, DirecTV has an app. Finally, the lighting in the room is Lutron so I can use their app to control lighting. The only thing without an app is the projector, so I pulled out its factory remote for my testing.



These are the apps I used for my testing. Lutron, DirecTV, Oppo, and a VNC viewer to connect to the surround sound processor

I use the VUDU app on the Oppo quite a bit, so I tried this first. The first thing I discovered is that for both the new processor and the Oppo, they have to be powered on for the app to engage them. With my all-in-one remote, this is not the case, as a command to power them on will turn them on. So I got up off my couch, walked out of the room, over to my rack and pushed the power button on each of them. It went downhill from there.

Using the iPad for up/down/left/right enter, is just not as easy or fast as a tactile remote. It does work, but is very clumsy.

I decided then to try the tricky part: bouncing around from app to app. I guess there are two schools of thought for activating apps – the multi finger swipe or the double tap of the home button. I have to say neither one works anywhere near as well as on the all in one remote, where it's just a button press.

I found this about as frustrating (if not more) as having a table full of remote controls.

This is what using apps feels like!



If you are a power user like me, you can probably fly through the guide or list of recorded shows with your tactile remote. Besides the fact of no tactile feedback on a touchscreen, each app places navigation keys in a different spot, so you can never really get used to tapping in the same spot for all your navigation.

For lighting control I do love the Lutron app. I use it all the time to control my home. When using it for lighting control in my theater though, I had to navigate to the page that controlled the theater. After that, it would stick to that page. However, on my smart remote it is still way faster to push the “lights” button. It takes me instantly to a lighting control page for just the theater.

The final straw for me was the connecting and in some cases the reconnecting part of apps. When I first open the DirecTV app, it takes 17 seconds (yes, I decided to time it) to just open up, then you have to navigate to

the remote control icon to be able to control it. Worse yet, when you leave either it or the Oppo app for more than a few minutes and go back to the app, it has to reconnect to the device. If you are a time shifter of your favorite shows and like to blast through the commercials, this is the process: pick up the iPad, swipe it to wake it up, (hopefully you were still on the DirecTV app, if it's been more than about 10 minutes, wait for it to reload), push the little icon to bring up the remote buttons, push ff. If you have a good handheld remote the process is push ff!!

As you can tell, while all of these various apps may seem pretty cool individually, collectively I think they are more frustrating than a table full of remote controls. Yes, it can save you the cost of a smart remote, but when I want to turn on the TV I don't want to get a warning that I need to update my app before I can use it or wait 30 seconds for it to boot up!

One other thing to point out about using a tablet is the spotlight issue. If you don't want to have to enter your password every time it goes to sleep, you can either not protect it, or set it to never time out. This results in a very annoying light glaring in your face as you try to enjoy a movie. If you let it time out, this means before you can affect any function of your system, you have to pick it up, swipe it, enter the password, then you have control. One solution could be to put it face down on the couch and throw a pillow over it!

With a great system, the user experience is far and away the most important aspect. Once I got everything adjusted (and was not touching the remote at that point) the experience part is of equal level to when using my great remote. However, the ease of getting quickly to that great experience is miles faster and less frustrating with a well thought out and properly programmed smart remote!

So, to summarize, yes, you can "cut the cord" of handheld remotes and control everything just fine with your tablet. You'll more than likely go back to your handheld remotes or for an even better access to your entertainment, consider a really well programmed all in one smart remote from Audio Advice!