Control4 HC-250 Home Controller Review, Part 1: The Home Theater Experience

The ironic thing about being a home technology journalist is that most of us can't afford the coolest toys we write about. Or, at least, that's historically been the case.

I've been covering home automation for more than a decade now, and for much of that decade, a single motorized shade would run you thousands of dollars and a single touchscreen remote cost about as much as four iPads. Sure, I probably could have gotten in some of those super-ridiculous home automation systems for review during my *Robb Report* days, but really, how could I possibly even begin to relate to a fancy remote control system that cost nearly as much as my middle-class Alabama domicile?

Of course, times have changed in that decade. I've been running a "lighting control" system for a few years now. And I put "lighting control" in mocking quotes, because it was really a $500 system cobbled together out of Z-Wave light switches and a server that ran on my main PC when it was in the mood to run. Which certainly wasn't always.

These days, though, for-real home automation is starting to be something that even I can relate to, and at the center of this affordable home automation revolution is Control4's HC-250 Home Controller.

The HC-250 is billed as an expandable, scalable, one-room controller—sort of a fancy universal remote control replacement designed to give you the complete one-button-touch home theater experience, and maybe control a few lights and other devices. Really, though, in my rather modestly sized house, the HC-250 is more than big (and powerful) enough to run a complete home's worth of lighting control, and security, to boot. All of which we'll get to.

But in the first leg of this review, I wanted to approach the HC-250 from a direction I think most potential customers will approach it—as a one-room universal remote control solution with room to grow—and discuss lighting and security integration in a separate write-up. For now, let's just focus on the controller itself, and how it handles my home theater gear.

Interestingly, the first meeting with my local Control4 integrator featured barely a mention of gear at all. He did take notes about my existing home theater system, but in our discussion about what sorts of things we could do with the HC-250, his questions—and my answers—were more about lifestyle: how I spend my time at home, how techy other members of the household are, what my entertainment interests are.

We quickly decided that multi-room music would make about as much sense in my system as nipples on a Buick because of the way I listen to music (crack open a nice ale, sit in my recliner, dim lights, queue up—gasp!—a whole album, and curse at anyone who dares to bother me while I'm listening). Which isn't to say that Control4's rich music playback capabilities weren't a major part of what I wanted to do with my home theater. I've had an Autonomic Controls MMS-2 Mirage Media Server for a while now, and used it quite a bit when I first procured it. As time went on, though, I started to sort of ignore it, since pulling up yet another iOS app after firing up my home theater just became an inconvenience. With Control4, though, I can access the contents of my MMS-2 (which pulls all of the tunes—no matter the format or resolution—from both mine and my wife's computers and stores them in one centralized location in the home theater), with onscreen metadata, the ability to queue up custom playlists on the fly, and best of all, direct access to all of those wonderful streaming music sources like TuneIn, Spotify, Pandora, SiriusXM, and even Rhapsody if you're into that sort of thing. And as a result, I use it a lot more. Like, on a nigh-daily basis.

Integrating the MMS-2 requires a Control4-specific driver licensed from Autonomic Controls, which my Control4 dealer wasn't familiar with, but other than that, automation of my home theater was a relative straightforward affair. The HC-250 comes with four IR ports, two of which can be reconfigured for RS-232; a front-panel IR blaster; a contact closure; a relay; and an Ethernet Port, which I'm using for IP control of several devices (and soon to be one more when the two-way IP driver for my Dish Hopper is released). That's more than enough control outputs for my system, but if you need more local control ports, Control4 also offers an IO extender to give you more innies and outties without stepping up to a more powerful processor. Had I decided to give the Control4 system more direct access to my PS3 and Xbox 360, that would have been necessary, but since I use both as game machines and game machines alone, I prefer to fire them up with their own gaming controllers, and simply have Control4 dial in all of the right AV inputs.

The only limitation I can find in the HC-250's control connections, assuming the number of them is sufficient for your system, is that you can't adjust the strength of the IR output. This was a crucial tweak back in the days when I had a Moxi Box DVR, which would overload and freak out when handed anything other than the weakest of direct IR signals. It isn't an issue with any of my current gear, so not a limitation for me, but if you have a Moxi or other device that's finicky with direct IR, it's something to consider.

During the discussion of how everything would be hooked up, my dealer did talk about all of the sorts of things other Control4 customers have done with keypads: double-taps to activate this, triple-taps to turn on that. And that's nice and all, I told him, but my mother-in-law and my father drop by frequently to babysit Bruno when I'm out of town, and they're both a bit intimidated by all of the electronics in my home already. What I wanted was a system that anyone could use without a bit of instruction. What I wanted was simplicity incarnate.

Which is good, because that's the sort of thing that Control4 really excels at. Which isn't

to say that the system isn't capable of some serious sophistication, even outside of the keypad tapping mentioned above. Although it's a very template-based UI, your dealer can create custom buttons to handle odd quirks—like, in my case, the fact that I have a Crowson Tactile Motion Amplifier powering my Elite HTS theater recliner, but don't really need that much stereo bass rumbling my tushy while I'm watching *The Daily Show*. Normally, Control4 is a very activity-based system: you watch this, these components come on; you listen to that, those components come on. With one custom-button dropdown press at the top of the UI, though, I can now engage the motion amplifier when I choose, which is nice.

But that aside, my home theater is now as easy to operate as an iPhone. All I've had to tell frequent guests is, "Press the '4' button in the center of the remote, and I promise you can figure it out from there." Since the HC-250 connects not only to your home network, and to all of your components via various control methods—IP, IR, RS-232, contact closures, etc.—but also to your display and sound system as an A/V source via Component or HDMI, pressing the "4" button pops an onscreen Navigator onto your display (TV or projector) that replicates the same screen you'll see on Control4 touchscreens and the MyHome mobile control app. Really, it turns your main display to a big non-touchy touchscreen interface.

From there, it's a total no-brainer to figure out how to do whatever you want to do. Wanna watch something? Press the big Watch button, then select Satellite. Or Blu-ray. Or whatever video sources you're hankering for. Know which channel you want to jump directly to on the satellite? That's not a problem, because your favorite channels list is also housed handily in the Watch screen, sortable alphabetically, numerically, or by type. And the real beauty is that icons for subsystems you don't have—or don't want appearing onscreen—aren't there to confuse guests. No thermostat or other comfort features? Then you won't see the Comfort button. No security features? Ditto. Only icons for what you can actually do (or actually want seen) are populated on the screen.

And what's really cool is that, unlike most advanced control systems of this nature—that is to say advanced automation systems that require a custom installer and can't be installed yourself—you still have the ability as the end-user to tweak things like your favorite channels list, and even change the channel icons yourself. Full disclosure: I did go through four days of Control4 dealer training so I could make more advanced modifications to my system, like adding review gear and actually being able to control it. But for the past month or so, I've been mostly ignoring those capabilities and focusing on the things that any end-user can tweak via the Home and Media editions of the Composer computer-based software used to program the system. And I'm kind of blown away by just how much you can actually tweak. In addition to favorite channels and radio stations and such, you can also set up really sophisticated automated events (e.g., if it's nighttime, and someone selects Blu-ray as a source, dim the media room light to 25%), and even create your own custom alarms that gently wake you up at your

chosen time each day (or not) with lights and even music. And since the release of OS 2.3, you don't even need the computer software to create all of the lighting scenes your heart desires; you can do it straight from the 7″ touchscreen, or the MyHome app on your computer, if you purchased a MyHome mobile app license for your system.
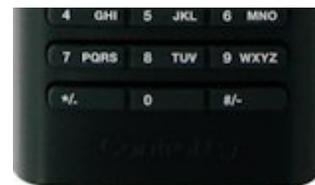
That's the barest hint of the sorts of things you can do yourself once the system is installed, but suffice it to say: whichever version of Composer you choose based on your level of comfort, both Composer Home Edition and Composer Media Edition give you a lot more control over the workings of your system than any other home automation system I can think of, without putting you in danger of messing everything up.

And if you do mess anything up, chances are really good that your dealer will be able to dial into the system remotely and fix things quickly, without rolling a truck. You can turn this capability off quite easily, if you're the paranoid type, but there's really no reason to be paranoid, since your dealer can't mess with anything on your network except for the Control4 system.

Given the flexibility of the HC-250 and the wealth of different ways it can be configured based on your lifestyle, it's crucial that you find the right Control4 dealer for you, if you have several to choose from in your area. In my case, living in the sticks of Alabama, I don't have many options, but luckily my installer was really adept at a few AV complications that arose during installation; the fact that video from my OPPO Blu-ray player is routed directly to HDMI 2 on my TV, for example, to make up for the fact that my Anthem D2v isn't 3D-ready just yet. There was also the fact that Control4 doesn't have drivers for my Blu-ray player, but using my original remote, my installer whipped up a fully functional driver in about five minutes, using the IR input capabilities of the HC-250 to capture commands directly.

I have to admit, there have been times that, for no real reason I can understand, my HC-250 has fired up the system on the wrong video input—a fact that I chalk up to the fact that this isn't a normal setup; usually, if you have both a surround processor and a video display in your system, there's only one video input on the display to worry about. Nevertheless, out of the maybe 100 times I've fired up the system in Blu-ray mode, it's gone to HDMI 1 on the display instead of HDMI 2 maybe two or three times. Definitely not a big deal, and quite easy to fix quickly.

Speaking of switching video inputs (and getting back to the automated events you can program yourself long after your dealer has left), one of the really cool events I've set up is specifically for my mother-in-law, who as I mentioned before comes to spend time with Bruno when the missus and I are out of town for the evening. The one thing I can always count on is that she'll come in, play with him for a few minutes, take him out back to powder his nose, and then come back into the media room and watch TBS for a few hours. Always TBS. Never anything but TBS. So I've created a lighting scene that's effectively an overnight out-of-town mode to let the Control4 system know we're out for at least the evening. If that scene is activated by a single button press when we leave, when my mother-in-law enters her code to unlock the front door, it waits ten minutes and then fires up the home theater and dials it directly to TBS. No muss, no fuss.

Setting that up involved merely scrolling from a list of actions and equal reactions in Composer, selecting what would do what and when, and really, that's it. You may need your installer to walk you through the ins and outs of your preferred version of Composer just to make sure you get it, because it's not entirely intuitive at first. But once you get it, it's easy. And quick. Here's a look at the macro detailed above.

Script

When the Den->Front Door is unlocked

If Lighting Scene "Road Trip" is Active
   If time is night time
     delay 10 minutes
     Turn on the Den->Satellite
     delay 15 seconds
     Push enter on the Den->Satellite
     Enter '1' on the Den->Satellite
     Enter '3' on the Den->Satellite
   Enter '9' on the Den->Satellite
     Push enter on the Den->Satellite

And after that's all activated, it's merely one button press to shut everything down when she's ready to go home for the night. That's the only time she has to touch the remote, unless for some strange reason she wants to watch something other than TBS (as if).

Control4 has a choice of two wand-style hard-button controls for its system: the SR-150, which is the more basic offering; and the SR-250, which adds a backlit monochromatic OLED display that converts the onscreen Navigator into a more simplistic text-based experience. I opted for the latter, so I don't have to wait for all of my gear to fire up and all of the inputs to be dialed in before taking control of my home theater. Instead, I can simple press the Watch button on the remote, scroll, select Satellite or Blu-ray, and I'm in business.

Honestly, though, the SR-250 is the one single, solitary aspect of the system that I don't completely love to the core of my soul. And not for any of the reasons I might have suspected. I've long had a URC MX-5000 remote controlling the theater, which was replaced by a URC Total Control system that has now been moved to the front of the house to control my bedroom home theater and home office electronics. I really, truly thought I would miss the fancy icons and color graphics of URC—the whole touchscreen experience built right into my hard-button wand.

Honestly, I don't miss the color graphics a bit. Nor the fancy Blu-ray and Satellite icons. The SR-250 is an incredibly well-built device that isn't done a bit of justice by photos. Look at pictures and you'd think it was a brick, but in fact the back is comfortably contoured, and it fits the hand like a glove. It's also incredibly responsive, constructed like an M1 Abrams with the fit and finish of a new Cadillac ATS—it seriously makes something like a Harmony feel like a cheap plastic toy—and although I've been pounding it for hours every day for over a month now, the battery life of the AA cells that power it is still kicking at a solid 90%. With more normal, non-reviewy usage, I can easily see the batteries lasting well over a year without needing a change.

My sole beef with the SR-250 is the button layout. And it may be due the fact that it has so many darned buttons—everything you would ever need, from a dedicated DVR button to the red, green, yellow, and blue buttons that have become so important recently. The problem is that,
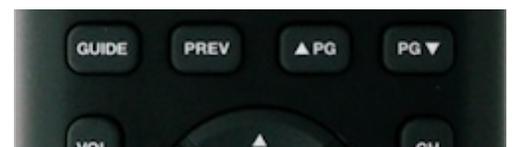
even after an intensive month, I still cannot find the buttons I need most—Play, Pause, Skip, Guide, Menu—without looking down at the remote. Conventional button design since the dawn of the remote control era has had the Play button in the middle of the remote, with Skip Forward to the right, Skip Back to the left, and Pause in the middle below. On the SR-250, Play and Pause are stacked on the right, exactly the same size as every other button, and there are absolutely zero tactile cues to allow your fingers to do the walking in the dark.

Honestly, though, if you swapped the position of a few buttons, and maybe made Play and Pause a little bigger, the SR-250 would be pretty close to the perfect universal wireless remote (it uses the same ZigBee wireless protocol as so many other Control4 devices, and has amazing range throughout the entire house, with no Wi-Fi interference or anything of the sort to worry about).

I also have Control4's 7" Portable Touch Screen with Camera in my home theater as an alternate source of control, and often find myself using it in lieu of the onscreen Navigator when I'm listening to the Mirage Media Server, but for the most part, I've found myself using it way more for the less entertainment-oriented aspects of my system and more for home control, so we'll take a closer look at it in Part 2 of my review—The Home Automation Experience—coming soon.

As for the home theater experience, though, I have to say: this is the sort of control I could have only dreamt about even five years ago. Fully integrated, touch-of-a-button control, with nearly infinite power and scalability, all from a system that, including programming and installation, costs less than most AV enthusiasts would pay for a good AV receiver. The thing is, like I said, I've had really nice unified control solutions for my home theater system for a few years now. As nice as the URC solution is, though, and as simple as I found it to operate, technophobic guests still found it daunting. With Control4, virtually anyone can easily do anything with my system, with no anxiety, and despite that simplicity, I don't find it limiting in the slightest. That's a bit of a miracle.

I love living in the future.

Continue reading at [Control4 HC-250 Home Controller Review, Part 2: The Home Automation Experience]

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