

❖ Pursuits

Mightier than the keyboard

Digital pens that talk to PCs are coming of age

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If you're anything like me, you've probably got a drawer full of gadgets that you used once or twice and then quietly forgot about. Mine contains a pocket scanner for scanning receipts (never around when I need it); a device that is supposed to skin and slice papayas in one smooth motion (only no one in our house seems to like papayas); and something called a Logitech digital pen. Forget Early Adopters; people like me are the Surly Adopters: We buy stuff and don't give it a chance.

But one of these gadgets is fighting back. The digital pen allows you to write normally on paper, but also to save what you write to your computer, simply by placing the pen in a

Loose wire

JEREMY WAGSTAFF

cradle connected to your PC. This is done by using a special pen and paper. The pen, as well as writing with ordinary ink, takes snapshots with a miniature camera of what you write, and the paper, covered in a unique patchwork of tiny dots, acts as a map for the pen to locate where on the page you're writing. Upload the pen's memory to the computer and you can see exactly what you've written or drawn on pages, recreated on your screen.

Logitech Inc.'s io pen first came out three years ago, but it's never really taken off. One obvious problem was that the first pens were a bit too, well, *chunky* for most users. It was a bit like holding a Cuban cigar in your hand. Fun for a while, but your fingers tire of the novelty pretty quickly. Logitech fixed that with a smaller model a year or so ago, although it's still bigger than your average pen. Perhaps the real problem when pitching it to the ordinary user was that it was just too unwieldy. Not as unwieldy as other attempts at digital writing, which



involved special clipboards, or attaching little infrared devices to your pad of paper, or carrying around wallets containing your PDA and a specially mounted notepad. But still unwieldy. As Tim Aughenbaugh, president of a South Dakota-based company called Talaro LLC, which makes products for digital pens, puts it: "Many people quit using a digital note-taking solution after a month or so, and the pen goes in a drawer."

To its credit, Logitech is still pushing its vision. Well, it isn't really Logitech's vision, but that of Swedish company Anoto AB, which invented the concept of a pen with a little camera and paper with a unique dot-map approach. Logitech licenses the technology from Anoto, and has been the most aggressive in pushing the idea. Or rather ideas: to retail customers, it's the idea of easily being able to save notes, drawings

and other doodlings; and to businesses, it's the idea of replacing heavy computer-like devices with specially designed paper and pens that can store and upload data to a computer, even wirelessly, using, say, Bluetooth. This market, says Olivier D'Eternod, Logitech's European business manager for digital writing, is close to critical mass. In the past year or so, he says, he's helped more than 100 companies—some of them heavy hitters—to develop systems. "This is to me the best signal that something is going to happen," he says.

Indeed, from monitoring onsite construction workers in Scotland to handing out parking tickets in Italy (both of which are actually happening), the Logitech pen makes sense for organizations, which might save money on expensive hardware, breakages and training.

But for the ordinary user who

would love to use a pen to do more stuff away from the computer, how exactly does this help? Well, Logitech is hoping to address that with a new version of its pen, the io2, just launched, which the company hopes will tempt a few more people to try it. The main changes are in the software, which improves on earlier efforts to recognize scribbles and turn them into editable text on the screen.

The new version allows you to add your own words and names to a personalized dictionary, improving the recognition rate. Another nice twist is improved tagging, which allows you to insert codes into your writing so that, when your pen uploads what you've written to a computer, the text is inserted automatically into certain programs—Microsoft Word, say, or Outlook. The company also has cut the price of its pen set to \$200 from \$250.

This takes the digital pen one step closer to being something that fits the pocket and work-style of you and me. But perhaps what's most encouraging is the emergence of third-party products that give you a few more options.

Take, for example, Talaro, the company founded and run by Mr. Aughenbaugh. The company's Xpaper features the same dot-map style, but is loose-leaf, rather than being in a book, and has no markings other than the dots (the io paper, for example, includes formatting such as headers), so users can design their own forms or print out existing forms and documents. The sheets can then be written on with most Anoto-ready pens.

Doesn't sound all that exciting? Well, imagine you receive a document that requires you to fill in boxes, tick others, and sign it before returning it to the sender. Normally, you'd either try to fill out most of the form on your computer, but in any case you'd have to print it out at some stage, sign it, and then either scan it and email it back, or fax it. With Xpaper, you could simply print it out, fill in whatever needs to be filled in, upload the pen's contents to your computer—and you have a digital version of the document, complete with all your handwritten entries. Not just that: The pen's ink shows up as blue while the form itself is black, meaning you have a perfect copy.

Logitech isn't the only company selling Anoto-style pens. Nokia Corp. has had its SU-1B, costing about \$250, for a few years, and Hitachi Maxell Ltd. has recently launched the sleek-looking Penit, priced between \$250 and \$300. But Logitech has shown more enthusiasm—and flexibility—than the others in trying to figure out how something like this might best work. It deserves a try—or, if you're a Surly Adopter like me, with a pen in a drawer, at least a second chance.

Send comments to loosewiremail@gmail.com

Music for the masses

At this festival, the whole world can hear the bands play

by JOHN JURGENSEN

The South by Southwest festival in Austin, Texas, one of the music industry's biggest events for discovering up-and-coming bands, is on until March 19. But you don't have to travel to the U.S. to catch the hottest new musical talent: Anyone with access to the Internet can preview more than 900 of the acts that music executives will be swarming to see.

Organizers of the festival, an annual showcase for independent music, have posted songs online by 948 of the 1,300 bands set to perform. Listeners can go to the festival's Web site to download MP3s from the bands for free, or hear them streamed over the Internet. The bands range from some that have gotten attention, like indie band Clap Your Hands Say Yeah, to some truly obscure acts.



It's a sign of how dramatically the process of discovering new music has changed in the digital age. While music scouts once relied on word-of-mouth, regional radio play and excursions to dingy clubs, they're increasingly looking to pod-

casts, music blogs and social networking sites such as MySpace to hear new bands and measure their audiences. Online buzz has helped launch the careers of acts including Fall Out Boy, a pop-punk band nominated for a Grammy this year.

The Internet is "where music gets discovered and buzz builds," says Ed Vetri, president of Wind-up Records, an independent label distributed by Sony BMG Music Entertainment. Mr. Vetri says his staff started combing through the MP3s

Buzz: *Clap Your Hands Say Yeah*

on South by Southwest's site as soon as they were posted Feb. 16. The team narrowed the pool of bands the label is interested in to about 25, of which it might sign two or three.

South by Southwest has offered music on its site since 2000; last March, the site had nearly one million downloads. At a time when more people than ever are paying for music online, it's a sizable trove of free songs.

Still, Mr. Vetri says virtual talent-scouting is no substitute for assessing a band on stage. He's accompanying 14 representatives to the festival to see acts they sampled online.

To sample the music on offer, go to www.sxsw.com and click "SXSW Bands." Click any band's name with a cassette icon next to it, then choose either "Download" or "Stream."