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Sleep with a Computer

Lab Watch

January 06, 2000

by Robert Buderl

Enter Ted Selker's basement digs at the MIT Media Laboratory and taste the fruits of a fertile imagination. For starters, there's a talking trivet, or hot pad, that gauges the temperature of the dishes it holds and says things like "hot and ready to eat" or "needs rewarming." And who could forget a couch that reminds those sitting in it of their appointments?

"Silicon and sensors are finally cheap enough that everyday things can know enough to help you use them," says Selker. When I looked in on Selker 18 months ago, he was head of user systems research at IBM's Almaden lab south of San Jose. Last fall, however, the IBM Fellow and co-inventor of the TrackPoint cursor control button officially joined Nicholas Negroponte's charges at MIT. While the freshly minted prof is still working to adapt computers to people's needs, there's a key difference in what he's doing here: The university setting lets him push computing boundaries much further than the corporate world allowed.

While that truth alone explains many of his gadgets, there is a method to this madness. Selker heads the newly created Context-Aware Laboratory, whose mission is to reduce "the communications bandwidth between a person and a computer by the computer knowing something about a person." Specifically, the idea is to combine nontraditional interfaces such as speech and gesture recognition with sensor data and specialized software models to enable computer systems to determine what folks are doing - and then adjust their behaviors accordingly.

Late-night reading. Computer whizzes around the world struggle with this problem. Selker offers a one-stop glimpse into what's being explored. Take his bed demo. "What should a computer do for you while you're in bed?" Selker asks.

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