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PERSONAL COMPUTING

Reconciling the Marriage of Mouse and Keyboard

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Now that operating systems and applications programs for just about every model of personal computer and workstation are using the "mouse and icon" system pioneered by Apple Computer Inc. on the Macintosh, there are countless mouse devices on the market, and variations such as the trackball, joystick and touch pad.

Yet, for all these different approaches to the same basic tool, we don't think anybody has yet gotten the design exactly right.

To use a personal computer, you obviously need a keyboard to input data and commands. There are other input devices, including voice-recognition gadgets and bar-code readers, but none works as well as the familiar keyboard.

Initially, personal computers used the keyboard and its arrow keys not only to input commands and data, but also to maneuver the cursor around the screen, to choose items from command menus and even to draw lines and pictures. But when Apple put a mouse on its Macintosh, it became obvious that the mouse was better for pointing and selecting. Nowadays, with Apple and Windows the two

key environments for PC users, a mouse-type pointing device is becoming more common. Most serious PC users today use both a keyboard and a mouse—or a mouse equivalent. The choices are legion.

Even if you just want a standard desktop mouse, you can choose among various shapes and sizes at bargain prices. Even a proven brand name like Logitech's "Mouseman" is available for about \$70 through mail-order.

It makes sense, though, to go one step up and buy a cordless mouse, which communicates with the computer via radio or infrared. This costs about \$130 through mail-order.

I prefer a "trackball," a mouse-like device that doesn't have to be moved around the desktop. Since our desktop is always littered with paper, coffee cups and similar junk, a standard mouse isn't practical. We've been happy with the "PC-Trac" trackball from MicroSpeed Inc. It works fine, appears to be indestructible and is available for less than \$70.

The craze for portable computing causes problems for mouse users. Once your lap (or airplane tray table) has a laptop computer on it, there's probably no room left for the mouse.

Several firms make special small trackballs that attach to the side of a laptop computer.

The Microsoft "Ballpoint," widely advertised at \$125 or so, is a great example. It sticks up just above the Enter key on a portable's keyboard; you move the ball with your thumb, and work the two mouse buttons with your fingers.

Gyratron Inc., a Saratoga, Calif., company, is about to market an input device called the "GyroPoint," which is a mouse that doesn't need a desktop. You move it around in the air and it moves the cursor using gyroscopic motion-sensing technology. If it works, it may become the best mouse for airplane passengers.

There are also ways to eliminate the mouse altogether, even for programs that require it. An obvious alternative to the "point-and-shoot" function of a mouse is a touch-sensitive screen. Rather than moving a cursor with a mouse to the name of the file you want to retrieve, you point at the file name on the screen (using your finger or a stylus), and it loads.

International Business Machines Corp. offers a touch-screen option for certain display monitors on its PS2 computers. The "TouchSelect" system is expensive (\$670 for the standard 12-inch monitor model 8513), but it's a start. Subsequent systems should be cheaper.

But for all this ingenuity in the design of the mouse and mouse-like devices, nobody has yet

figured out to our satisfaction how to make the keyboard and the mouse compatible.

If you're a reasonably fast typist, you don't want anything to take your fingers off the keys. A mouse or trackball works great, but to make them work, you have to remove a hand from the keys.

One solution is a \$50 software program called "NoMouse for Windows" (Abacus, 1-800-451-4319), which lets you use the arrow keys on your computer even for programs that say they require a mouse. This won't be as quick or precise as a mouse, and obviously won't work well for drawing programs, but it's a way to run mouse programs without taking your hands off the keys.

What may prove to be the best marriage between keyboard and mouse is a system developed at IBM's Watson Research Center. As reported in Electronic Engineering Times, this is a "pointing stick," about the size of a toothpick, that sticks up between the G and H keys of the keyboard. With your hands on the home keys, you can move this stick with either index finger to point and select, mouse-style.

Let's get hopping, IBM! You may have the best mouse yet in that research lab. The quicker something like that comes to market the better.