tools of the trade

Logitech VX Revolution Mouse

A Masterpiece of a Mouse

After using Logitech's new **VX Revolution™ Laser Mouse** for a few weeks, I realized that I had not shaken it once to locate or center the arrow cursor. The highly responsive wireless mouse is effortlessly precise, partly because your hand settles so easily on its sculpted profile and partly because the base glides on five low-resistance points of contact as a laser tracks your movement. There are two Revolution mice, the VX for laptops and MX for desktops. Both are wireless with USB microreceivers that receive and send information. The VX has a parking compartment in its base so you don't lose the small USB receiver when traveling. But most surprising are the topside controls that include a hyper-fast scrolling wheel that will scroll through 10,000 lines of an Excel spreadsheet with one quick spin—or

less, if you put on the brakes by touching your finger to the wheel. The MicroGear Precision scroll wheel will click slowly through screens or spin rapidly—you set the mode. Right below the wheel is a search button. Highlight a word in a document or on a Web page, click the One-Touch Search button, and the search utility of your choice opens and gives its results. There's a zoom control on the thumb side that zooms in and out of images, spreadsheets, and documents. The MX has a thumb-side wheel that lets you jump between documents or applications. And you can reassign different tasks to some of the controls.
www.logitech.com

CardScan Executive is a desktop color scanner that scans, stores, and organizes business cards into a single digital database. You can also drag-and-drop other contact infor-

mation from e-mails and sources online. After scanning in the card, you do a quick check to verify the data and choose a category to store the card. You can edit the categories, and the basic view offers an alphabetical list on the left and a Rolodex-like image of the color scan on the right. You can also switch to a simpler black-and-white image. It takes no more than 10 minutes to set up the CardScan, and once the program is loaded, you just plug the device into a USB port. There's no power source needed. The scans take seconds, and the device is very accurate in sorting out the various types of information included on cards. You can even opt to scan the back if there's information there. CardScan Executive has a footprint of 4 × 6.5 inches, and its low pro-

file sits out of the way and ready to scan as long as your computer is turned on. There are a number of ways to sync the data with ACT!, GoldMine, and Lotus Notes, as well as Outlook, PDAs, and smart phones.
www.cardscan.com

The **Seagate Pocket Hard Drive** is available with a 6GB or 8GB memory. It's a great way to take data or presentations on the road because it offers extra security protection with password protection for Windows files. The Pocket Drive measures only slightly more than three inches across and is .71 inches high, making it

CardScan Executive

Turn That Thing Off ◆ Michael Castelluccio, Editor

■ DOES TELEVISION WATCHING PRODUCE APATHY—reducing brain voltage while teasing apart moral fiber? What about the Internet? We know it's the library where you can get such outlaw texts as *The Anarchist's Cookbook*, but what about the attention-span-shortening hypertext links? Can it shape (warp) unformed minds young and old? And electronic games? Besides the content (mayhem, bias, sadism), can hours of thumb-twitching, head-rocking hyperactivity change the way we experience the real world?

It seems we have immersed ourselves in behavioral environments that could produce rich syndromes of digital tics, from which recovery might not be so easy. And, as we are inclined to do, we have plunged right in with little forethought and massive marketing. Isn't it time that we do some serious thinking about where we are right now and where all this is leading?

The Three Faces of E-Reality
One confusing element about digital media is the face that we stare into while watching TV, browsing, or gaming—or *inter*face, if you prefer. The monitor can be the same for all three, but the activities definitely are not.

Television, no matter how HD or 3-D it becomes, encourages passivity—couch potatoes kick back. Sofa Ninjas, on the other hand, lean forward as their thumbs

Seagate Pocket Hard Drive

pocket size. It weighs only 2.2 ounces. The 8GB drive will store thousands of business files or up to eight hours of digital video. The USB 2.0 cable is retractable to make it more portable, and there's no power supply needed. The Pocket Drive is hot-swappable, which means you don't need to shut down or reboot to plug in or unplug. The 3600-RPM drive has a 2MB cache, and data transfers are possible up to 480 Mbps. Shock absorbers protect the mechanism. As with internal drives, you can manage partitions, set write protection, and manage the contents. It works on both Windows and Mac platforms, but the password protection feature is available only with Windows systems. www.seagate.com

Today, even laptops come with DVD burners, so backups and video recording are available on most hardware. The trick is getting the right software to manage CD, CD-RW, DVD, video, and all sorts of audio formats in a single program that isn't overwhelming. The new **Nero 7 Ultra Edition** is very reasonably priced and will do just about anything you need related to optical storage media. Backups, for instance, are easy to schedule and manage with this utility. You can schedule a calendar for the backups and secure your data with 128-bit encryption and password protection. You can back up disc images or whole drives onto either internal or external hard disks. You can do FTP backups and choose to use the Nero intelligent compression filter. If you're working with audio files, Nero 7 supports audio recording, editing, and mixing. It will rip (copy) tracks from audio CDs, add surround effects, or let you edit your collections with a sequencer and Text II Speech converter. The DVD recording functions provide a complete package for most needs. Go to www.nero.com for a full list of features.
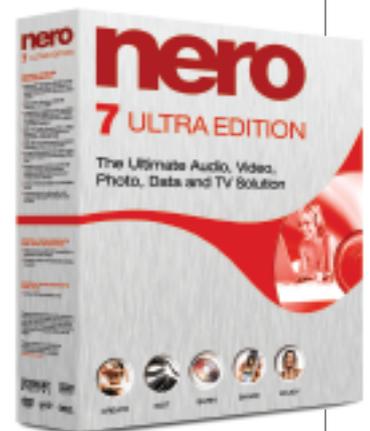
Nero 7 Digital Media Suite

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control flying limbs and running assassins. Less kinesthetically involved, but still more active than TV watchers, are the Web travelers. Their scrolling and linking produce a less obvious interactivity.

But all three digital participants have escaped the world, temporarily, replacing their wide periphery with a narrow glass window or LCD. Add the inordinate amount of time spent in these alter realities, and there's reason for concern. After all, everyone knows that if you always have the baby sleep on one side, you're going to end up with a new, disturbing look for junior, and if one of the crazy grandkids is always jumping out and scaring grandpa, it won't be long before you'll be changing the old guy's medication. Actions produce reactions, and persistent repetition can flatten heads and shatter nerves.

There should be some serious, long-range studies on these matters, not just anecdotal complaining.

The Internet Paradox

But that seems to be easier said than done. Take the Internet. It offers a wide variety of services and relationships. It's also a rapidly moving (evolving) target. What began as a kind of CB radio for Ph.D.s has become a commercial/entertainment medium.

In 1998, Robert Kraut and five other social researchers at Carnegie Mellon University published a study of the psychological well-being of a sample of Internet users in the Pittsburgh area. Three years later, Kraut followed up with the same group and came up with a surprisingly different set of conclusions.

The original study, titled *Internet Paradox*, "reported small but reliable negative effects of using the Internet on measures of social involvement and psychological well-being among the samples." The authors found these results to be paradoxical because "participants in the sample used the Internet heavily for communication, which generally has positive effects." Instead, they noted "increases in loneliness" and sadness.

Wind ahead to the report redux, *Internet Paradox Revisited* (2001), in which Kraut, et al., wrote, "In a three-year follow-up of the original sample, we find that negative effects dissipated over the total period. We also report findings from a longitudinal study in 1998-99 of new computer and television purchasers. This new sample experienced overall positive effects of using the Internet on communication, social involvement, and well-being." Extraverts benefited more than introverts, but the conclusions were the same for teens and adults.

So what happened over the three years? Did the technology become more humanized, or did the humans become more technological? The answer, apparently, is yes in both cases.

Many more people, both old and young, have access to the Internet today. When the first study was done, only about one-third of the population was online. Also, social opportunities have blossomed. Take three recent phenomena that have exploded on the Web. With MySpace, you can introduce yourself to and then interact with the world. You can share your photos with strangers in New Zealand simply by uploading them to Flickr—and get theirs, as well. YouTube lets anyone become a video autobiographer or short-film producer. The number of participants in these three new outlets is staggering.

All of which raises another question: Is this only virtual socialization? And is virtual a healthy substitute for real interaction? Maybe the answer rests in your definition of virtual. Is a telephone conversation real or virtual socialization? Is there a difference between an e-mail message and a written letter? Which is virtual?

In September, 110 teachers, psychologists, children's authors, and other experts in the U.K. published an open letter in the *The Daily Telegraph*. Their complaint centered around the loss of human contact in childhood development along with the manipulation of children by market forces. They all agreed that children need:

1. Real play, not sedentary, screen-based entertainment;
2. First-hand experience of the world they live in;
3. Regular interaction with real-life significant adults in their lives; and
4. Time to develop in a slower-paced environment.

The group's first step toward a solution to this complex problem was, "We therefore propose as a matter of urgency that public debate be initiated on child-rearing in the 21st Century. This issue should be central to public policy-making in coming decades."

Contrast this call to action with the comments made by a Stephen W., who wrote in an online discussion about the Kraut Internet study:

"It's worth noting that the technology will continue to improve, and with it virtual socialization may come to be regarded as even more fulfilling than its real-world counterpart. This may be a scary thought for some, but I'm sure there are people for [whom] this is already a reality."

Maybe it's time we break out the boxes of lenses and begin to take a closer look at where we are and what's going on. ■