

Digital Edge FreeHand Keyboard

Reviewed by Jon Jenkinson

Now is an exciting time for keyboards. Not since Microsoft launched the natural keyboard have so many new ideas appeared (or at least old ideas been revamped). Microsoft is at it again with the Office Keyboard, receiving poor reviews in a magazine near you now, and a few of the smaller companies have jumped on the bandwagon too. Have you tried to buy a keyboard by itself recently (on the high street, that is)?

Similarly, mice aren't just mice anymore. They're glowing things, transparent things, shaped things, there's now more balls, no balls, radio controlled, to name but a few along with my favourite, the pen tablet, pioneered for the cheap market by Wacom and now sold by everyone.

Those who know me know I hate mice. A more unnatural way of navigating couldn't have become standard if it had tried. I prefer a pen: it's something I'm used to, and the concept of pointing a pen at a relative representation of the screen (a tablet) is most natural. Actually, the most natural is a wand, which is a pen you can waft around in three-dimensional space. [*You've been reading too much Harry Potter. Ed.*] I've seen them in magazines, and even PC World advertised one once, but I've never been able to find one!

I'd used a Wacom tablet for nearly four years, up until recently, when desk space became a prime issue. I suddenly needed to fit my monitor, keyboard, base unit, Wacom tablet and a mouse (for compatibility, you understand, not games) into about half the space I had before. Something had to give.

I toyed with losing the mouse. After all, Tomb Raider is easier to play with a keyboard, but Baldur's Gate? So the mouse had to stay. If only Wacom would produce a driver that would work well with a DirectX window! The keyboard had to stay and, though I did consider it, it didn't seem a good idea to get rid of the base unit and monitor.

The solution came in the form of the **Digital Edge FreeHand** keyboard. During a visit to one of the many office stores I found a plethora of keyboards I hadn't seen before, and most reasonably priced. There was a keyboard (Viacom, I think) with a built-in microphone and software to allow you to shout at your PC. I almost bought it just for the pleasure of training it to respond to, "*** Word now you stupid little ***") There were coloured ones, bent ones, ones that I'm sure were unsure of what they were, and the FreeHand.

This combines a keyboard (laptop style) with, if you hadn't already guessed, tablet input. It's not cheap (unless you compare it with the £150 Wacom now charge for my tablet) but it seemed ideal and I bought it immediately. The keyboard has quite a slim profile so it sits easily under your hands. Although it's only half a centimetre lower than my old Dell keyboard, it's far more comfortable to use. It lacks the numeric keypad but, as with laptops, this is solved by dual use of the right hand letters and the num-lock key.

The main feature for me was that the missing numeric keypad was replaced with a pen and a tablet. It's small, at just 3.5-inch square (approx 9cm), but it does the job well. The pen is attached by a piece of wire to the back of the keyboard and, while I'd prefer the wire not to be there (as with the Wacom system), it doesn't get in the way too often.

To connect the unit to the PC, plug it into the normal keyboard socket and also into a serial port. Mine used the standard 9-pin D but there is a USB version available. Next came driver installation and my first error.

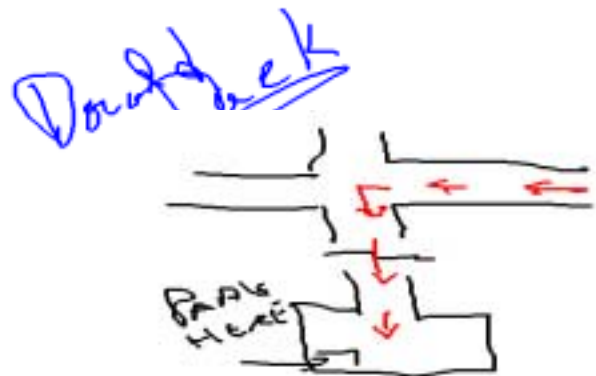
I don't know about you but, these days, whenever I buy a new piece of hardware (or software for that matter) the first thing I do is to trawl the supplier's website and download the latest driver or patches. In Digital Edge's case this meant that the latest driver for Win2K was v3.3. Down it came, no trouble, and on I went trying to install.

Well, the install routine hung and, whilst the keyboard typed, the pen went all over the place. After a few of the usual tricks I gave up and replaced the keyboard inside its box ready to go back to the shop. Saddened, I looked at the CDs that had come with it. "I want this so much", I thought, "I'll even try the software!"

So I connected everything up again, popped the CD in and ran the install. Imagine my surprise as I'm presented with an install routine marked as v3.4 which supports Win2K (the box which says it only goes up to NT4). The routine finished perfectly and I have a wonderful working keyboard and pen (and it doesn't interfere with the mouse like some other keyboard installs I've tried). I think they need to update their web pages very quickly!

There are three utilities supplied with the system, *Annotate for Word*, *Sign It* and *Pen Launcher* along with one application, the ubiquitous Painter Classic.

Sign It is the most obvious. It enables you to "write" your signature (or, to be honest, doodle) and then copy it to the clipboard to be pasted in as a graphic.



A signature and a doodle produced in Sign It

In some applications the image is pasted directly in. In PaintShop Pro (used in the examples above) drawing onto a blank PSP work area and hitting the copy to clipboard button in **Sign It** produces an image straight away. This little utility has more uses than you might think, enabling you to add a doodle to an email, giving quick directions for instance. Whether it is a good thing to have your signature available as a picture is another matter, though. Someone could, if they wished, paste it into any document. Did you really sign that?

The next application is **Pen Launcher**. You can define any, or all, of the four sides of the tablet to be "hot areas", each containing five hotspots, giving you up to 20. Click on one of these and the application you assigned to that specific area in **Pen Launcher** fires up. I've not used this yet as, although I can see its benefits, I already have "quick keys" and shortcuts locked in my head. Suffice to say that it works.

Annotate for Word is a handy little thing, especially if you do a lot of proof reading or highlighting of others' work. It allows you literally to annotate and not just highlight by selection. The following paragraph illustrates a Word document where this utility has been used.

~~Digital Edge FreeHand Keyboard (I just bought one!) As many readers will know I've been a hater of mice ever since my left hand started to go numb when using a mouse. For a few years now I've used a Wacom A6 Graphics Tablet in place of a mouse. I was lucky in that I bought my tablet well before they rebranded it as an Intuos and stuck an extra £100 on the price, but the thing has become second nature and invaluable. Why anyone would use a mouse now, I have no idea. That was until my desk got smaller and I had to carry a monitor and keyboard within the normal depth, without an extension out the back. Suddenly I couldn't have my tablet in front of me and it felt all wrong. Enter the FreeHand.~~

An example of Annotating: oh what fun!

As you can see, if you do buy this and work in any kind of text editing role, you're going to have a lot of fun.

You might have guessed by now that I do like the FreeHand, but are there any drawbacks? There's a couple of niggles,

both minor. The lack of a numeric keypad is annoying, simply because I'm used to one. Digital Edge produces the FreeHand Pro, which is a larger keyboard with the tablet below the numeric keypad. It looks horrible, so I can only recommend that you get one if being without the numeric keypad is not an option.

The other downside is the cable attached to the pen. Whilst it can occasionally get in the way a little like the cord does on your phone, the real problem is that the pen is always on. With my Wacom I have a habit of keeping the pen in my hand while I type. As the pen is nowhere near the tablet when doing this, pressing the buttons doesn't matter. With the FreeHand, it does matter because the buttons on the pen are live, so I've found myself firing off right menu clicks at regular intervals. Is this a problem with the keyboard or the user?

Should you buy one? Well, you should certainly try one. If you use a tablet as a replacement for a mouse then I think the answer has to be yes. Desk space is becoming more and more confined and this economises handsomely. If you don't already use a pen I urge you to try one. Once you get used to doing without a mouse your life will never be the same again. As a solution to my problem, the FreeHand is perfect.



The FreeHand



The FreeHand Pro



Jon is our BUG Technical Leader for Scotland and the North of England, our webmaster, and compiles the Developers' Information Library CD.

As if that wasn't enough, Jon is a prime mover behind "The Bits..." C++Builder information and tutorial website - see www.richplum.co.uk/cbuilder.

Jon's CBuilder Column will be back in the next issue, when he is further on the road to recovery from him recent illness.

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