

Digital Tools

What's in Your USB Port?

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More From Stephen Manes

The physical format of the thumb drive--USB connector at one end, plastic case at the other--has suddenly become what Winnie the Pooh called "a Useful Pot to Put Things In." The original thing was memory, in quantities far greater than floppy disks can handle. But now the format encompasses everything from Wi-Fi adapters to cameras that can shoot video.

Memory remains the primary use for the sneakernet set. Plug this data-on-a-stick into a USB port, and a new drive is suddenly available to do your storage bidding--no driver installation required unless you're using an older operating system. You can get 32 megabytes for about \$15; a 256-megabyte model with the higher-speed USB 2.0 goes for as little as \$50.

As USB memory becomes a commodity, manufacturers are developing new features. If you're willing to pay a steep premium for cuteness (16 megabytes for \$50, 256 for \$150), you can get a tiny model that slips into a plastic duckling and lights it up from the inside--the iDuck from Dynamism.com. Better idea: an expandable combo drive like the \$50 Kanguru 64MB MicroDrive Plus. It comes with its own memory but can also accept SD cards like the ones that fit into many digital cameras.

Some USB drives now ship with helpful software. Lexar Media's JumpDrive Traveler comes with three special programs aimed at those who often switch from one machine to another. One lets you access Internet Explorer on a machine that's not yours without leaving cookies, history or other traces of your surfing on the machine's hard drive; it can also take along bookmarks from your main machine. Another program lets you use Outlook Express with your own settings; a third lets you synchronize files between, say, your office and home machines. The premium over

plain USB drives is about \$25.

Stealthsurfer is a USB drive with password protection for whatever you store on it, plus its own version of the Netscape 7.0 browser. The advantage is that surfing doesn't leave tracks--cookies, passwords, porn--on whatever machine you use. But it does leave traces of itself that might raise questions with your office ITmanager, and I had repeated problems getting Windows to let me remove it safely. The documentation doesn't jibe with the way the software actually works, and the premium is a whopping \$100 above a comparable USB-only drive.

Also pricey: Sony's \$200 FIU-810 Puppy Fingerprint Identity Token, which is basically a 64MB USB drive with a fingerprint recognizer and software that lets you secure what's on the drive or connected machine biometrically. In corporate situations the unit can be used in a wide variety of authentication scenarios. For regular consumers it's probably overkill.

Need a Wi-Fi adapter for your computer? logear's \$75 Wireless-G to USB 2.0 Flex Adapter gives you high-speed connections and pivots to help aim the antenna in the right direction, but its documentation requires careful deciphering. If you need only the slower form of Wi-Fi, D-Link's DWL-122 stuffs an antenna into a traditional thumb-drive package for about \$40.

D-Link's tiny \$40 DBT-120 USBBluetooth adapter brings that form of wireless networking to your computer along with all the usual Bluetooth software annoyances. And Griffin Technologies' \$60 ControlKey is designed to restrict the use of your computer if you don't have the USB key and a password; I found the documentation and user interface so baffling that I was mortally afraid I would be shut out of my own machine.

Philips recently brought out potentially the most versatile USB stick product of all--the KeyCorder 019, which puts an MP3 player, a video recorder and a 2-megapixel digital camera into a single \$250 device that can also serve as a 128-megabyte flash drive. But the video and photo aspects are doomed by a grainy electronic viewfinder that's virtually useless in bright sunlight and a fixed-focus, nonzoom lens that produces third-rate pictures. Using the viewfinder to look at what feels like a peep show of pictures and videos you've taken requires fiddling with a little controller on a wire that connects to headphones. The unit's battery gets its juice from the USB port; a full charge takes four hours.

Lexar Media's JumpGear MP3 is a \$40 controller, display and battery holder (two AAAs) designed to mate with the company's JumpDrive Sport USB drives, whose signature is a hard-to-use wraparound rubber cap. The user interface is particularly lame, but the unit can handle Windows Media and MP3 tracks; you can find a 512MB JumpDrive Sport for about \$120 after rebate or save money by putting up with less capacity. In theory you might use multiple drives for multiple playlists.

But the best USB stick music player I've seen is the Nomad MuVo TX 512MB from Creative Labs. The detachable USB part comes with 512 megabytes, an attractive backlit display that provides genuinely useful track information, and a simple user interface that includes such things as a customizable graphic equalizer; it plugs into a battery holder that takes a single AAA cell. The USB 2.0 interface lets you fill the thing up with MP3 and Windows Media files in less than five minutes, and, like the JumpGear, it can play downloads protected by digital rights management. It also has a voice recorder with audio quality that can charitably be called lousy. But at \$250, the same price as a rechargeable iPod Mini with eight times as much storage, it's just too pricey. Maybe if it were shaped like a rubber duck ...

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