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The memory key to a geek's heart



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Memory keys are really handy little gadgets — plug them into any USB port and you've got an instant removable drive for transferring files, backing up important stuff, and so on. But storage is just the beginning. Memory-key makers are starting to add new features that make their products a whole lot more versatile and useful.

Memory keys - also known by a variety of other names, such as USB Flash drives, thumbdrives or keychain drives - have been around for several years, and they've become a commodity. The number of keychain memory drives shipped worldwide is expected to jump from about five million in 2002 to an astounding 250 million in 2007, according to market research firm Semico Research.

That huge increase in volume is allowing drive makers to cut manufacturing costs, and as prices continue to plummet, they are adding new features to help their products stand out from the crowd. Since the drives plug into USB slots that can handle just about any conceivable kind of computer peripheral, from cameras to networking devices, designers are able to piggyback some of these capabilities on top of memory key storage systems. The extra features make memory keys even more attractive and often add little to the price tag.

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[Soyo](#), best known for its motherboards, is a good example. It has a new keychain drive with a built-in 11 Mbps WiFi wireless network adapter. Plug it in and you get both a removable hard drive and an 802.11b network access point. This is particularly useful for notebook owners, because most laptops only have a couple of USB slots. With the Soyo hardware, people can add wireless capabilities and extra removable storage while only monopolizing a single USB slot.

Sony has another cool USB 2.0 combo-device. Its latest [Micro Vault](#) is a 128MB memory key with a built-in fingerprint sensor. The sensor can be used to lock or unlock an encrypted portion of the keychain drive, and the software also lets it control access to a PC through things such as the host computer's screensaver. Sony's Micro Vault with Fingerprint Access can be used to encrypt files on the computer's own hard drive, and store passwords for Web sites, too. It's pricey, but neat.

Philips Electronics has a flash drive with a camera built into it. The [Philips USB Key Ring Camera](#) has a 1.3 megapixel camera, 64MB or 128MB of memory, and weighs in at 12 ounces. It plugs straight into a PC or Mac so you can transfer photos or files to and from the computer's hard drive. The 64MB version sells for about \$100 (U.S.) and the 128MB version is \$149.

[Creative Labs](#) and [Azio](#) are among several companies that have developed USB drives with built-in MP3 music players. They're marvels of miniaturization — thumb-sized drives with tiny built-in playback controls, headphone jacks and display screens, along with room for an AA battery. You plug the drive straight into a computer, drag and drop songs onto the drive's icon in the computer's file manager as if the player were a hard drive in your desktop, and that's it — no complex software for transferring songs. The icing on the cake is that both units also have an integrated microphone for recording voice memos. And whatever memory you don't use up with music and voice recordings can be used to transport any kind of file, from documents to photos to short video clips.

[Solid Alliance](#) has come up with a fun spin for youngsters and the young at heart who need portable storage. The i-Duck USB Memory Storage Device is a simple USB 1.1 keychain drive, and it has rather paltry capacity of just 16MB. But it's shaped like a tiny duck (a miniature of the ones people reach for at bath time), and when you hook it up to a computer it glows thanks to LEDs embedded in the duck's body. The duck is a difficult product to track down (your best bet is on-line stores), but it comes in pink, blue and (of course) bath-time yellow.

Then there's speed. Rather than the pokey 12 megabit-per-second speed of USB 1.1, Iomega has boosted the transfer rate of its [Mini](#) series of drives by upgrading the electronics to work with 480 Mbps USB 2.0 ports. They're still backwards compatible with USB 1.1, though, so they'll work with both old and new computers. This is a good move, because while the original thumbdrives were only 8MB or 16MB, the largest models of the latest crop of drives can hold more than 1GB. That means that now you can start transporting large collections of music and photo files, and even video clips or large presentations, and you won't have to wait around for these big files to trickle onto the memory key at 12 Mbps.

But while the new USB hardware configurations can be fascinating, some of the biggest changes in keychain drives are happening with software. Companies like Iomega have realized as memory key capacities get larger, part of that space can be used for programs.

Iomega bundles some handy utilities for managing its Mini Drive and the files on it. My favourite is a console that pops up in the corner of your Windows desktop

when you plug in a Mini Drive. It shows you the capacity of the drive, how much used and unused space there is, and it lets you eject the drive with the touch of a button instead of fooling around with the Windows USB-eject menu. It also allows you to specify certain folders to automatically synchronize when the drive is connected to your main PC, so you can back up important files or keep a current copy of crucial work and information with you at all times.

The drive has a link stored on it that takes you to Iomega's portable storage Web site. This is a smart marketing ploy, because the site has a huge array of downloadable software — both freeware and packages that are for sale. The list of utilities, programs and games is dizzying, and they're all designed to be stored and run off a keychain drive.

A company called Forward Solutions Inc. has released the [Migo](#), is another prime example of what you can do with a keychain drive and some programming ingenuity. The Migo is basically a standard keychain drive — plug it into a computer's USB port and the system will set it up as a removable hard drive. But the Migo has some built-in software called PocketLogin that makes it far, far more useful than one of its generic memory-only cousins.

When you plug in the Migo and call it up in the My Computer window, you'll find a file stored on it. Run that file and you'll be presented with a screen that asks whether you want to synchronize the Migo with the computer (for times when you're at your own machine), or run your preset profile on the computer (when it's a machine you're borrowing). If you're at your own machine, the Migo makes a clone of your settings, important files and Outlook 2000 or 2003 e-mail from your main computer. Then if you plug the Migo into another computer and run the program again, it will make the borrowed computer look temporarily like your own — right down to the wallpaper and desktop file folders.

If you do some work on the borrowed computer — writing documents or sending e-mail, for example - the Migo records it all and updates everything on your own computer the next time you plug the Migo into it. Basically, it lets you keep a virtual copy of your office or personal PC in your pocket (password-protected, of course), and since USB-equipped PCs are everywhere these days, some people will probably be able to get by on trips taking the Migo on the road instead of a notebook. The Migo has some drawbacks, including the fact that it only works with Internet Explorer and Outlook, but the company says versions for other browsers and e-mail systems are in the works.

Another interesting gadget is the [StealthSurfer](#). It works like a standard keychain drive so you can use it for backing up or transporting files, but like the Migo, it has a small program permanently stored on it. That program is what the company refers to as "Stealth Netscape," a special version of Netscape 7. It can take about a minute to become fully active when you run it, because Stealth Netscape overrides the browser settings in Windows, but the net result (pardon the pun) is that you end up browsing from the memory key. Any files — be they cookies, cache or temp files — get stored on the memory key instead of on the host computer's hard drive, so there's no trace left on the computer to show where you've been browsing.

There are several potential uses for the StealthSurfer. Its marketing material mentions leaving no tracks when surfing, um, off-colour content a computer other people use, but it's also a handy personal or business tool that the company says is quite popular with lawyers, and with travellers who use remote terminals a lot. You could use it at an Internet cafe and not leave behind any trace of where you've been, for example. Use it at a friend's house or on a hotel computer when you log into your bank account or other password-protected site, and you won't

leave potentially compromising information to be found by prying eyes. The StealthSurfer is password-protected, too, in case it gets lost or stolen.

If security is your main concern, Verbatim has a USB 2.0 line of USB keychain drives called [Store 'n' Go](#). The value-add is a built-in software program that provides password protection. The software "manager" included with Store 'n' Go not only formats the drive if you ever need to wipe it clean, but can partition it into a public and a secure partition. You can store sensitive data on the secure partition, and leave things like ownership information on the public side in case a lost memory key is found by a good Samaritan.

It seems like there's almost no end to what manufacturers can do with these devices, and as competition in the keychain drive market heats up, it's only going to increase the pace of development. One thing is certain — memory keys aren't just for storage any more.



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