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Byline: Dan Gillmor

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. _ As human-computer interactions go, my relationship with my wristwatch is reasonably amicable. I glance at it, and immediately know the time, date and day of the week.

I've learned how to adjust the hour for time zones, but other functions remain somewhat mysterious. Changing the date or day of the week tends to be trial and error _ mostly error.

This is the sort of issue that captivates the professionals in a field known as human-computer interaction. Many of them were in Fort Lauderdale this week at the biggest annual conference on the subject. The gathering is weighted toward academics and corporate researchers, but there are nuggets of fascination for the rest of us.

Some of the most interesting work in the arena is in the area of handheld devices. By and large, the tradeoff when using them is convenience, such as small size, vs. capabilities, such as an often too-small screen and lack of computational oomph.

Some of the research projects discussed Tuesday were especially intriguing:

_Keeping track of schedules is a primary task for many users of handhelds. A team of researchers from the University of Maryland and Microsoft have teamed up on "DateLens" (www.cs.umd.edu/hcil/datelens/), a calendar-on-steroids for the Pocket PC. The software gives an overview of a schedule, but lets the user zoom in on events in intelligent ways, such as highlighting competing events. The researchers say test users have found they can do some kinds of complex tasks more easily than with commercial handheld calendars. A question is whether people want to do complicated things with their calendars or just keep track of the basics.

_Making the handheld screen larger in a virtual way has obvious practicality in many areas. Ka-Ping Yee, from the University of California-Berkeley, was showing his "peephole display" (www.sims.berkeley.edu/ping/peep/) on a Palm device. Imagine that a handheld is a small window hovering over a larger screen. Move the handheld and you see other areas of the big screen. In other words, the display is aware of what part of the larger image it's showing. If you combine that capability and others with standard handheld input devices, such as the stylus used for writing, the possibilities expand.

_The profusion of remote controls bedevils everyone with modern video and audio systems, and universal remotes have come into the market to address the problem. Taking that notion a step further is a team from Carnegie Mellon University and Maya

Design, both located in Pittsburgh, which is experimenting with "personal universal controllers." These are devices based on handhelds _ including PocketPC and mobile phones _ that might someday be the remote control for all kinds of household systems, including the lights and other appliances.

_Writing on the handheld is a slow process, typically accomplished character by character with a stylus or by using thumbs on a minikeyboard. Shumin Zhai, from IBM's Almaden research lab in San Jose, Calif., and Per-Ola Kristensson, from Linkoping University in Sweden, have developed a way to write words via a few, linked strokes of a stylus (www.almaden.ibm.com/u/zhai/topics/virtualkeyboard.htm). The system, called "Project Shark," interprets strokes as words, offering a kind of shorthand for handhelds. (Don't hold your breath on this one. It's so complicated that users will have to learn a new way of writing. Then again, it took me weeks to learn typing in high school.)

Remember, these are research projects, not products. But they give you some insight into what some smart people are doing. Human-computer interaction is growing, and we need more of this kind of innovation to make it work for us, not the other way around.

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