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LOOSE WIRE

By JEREMY WAGSTAFF



A Passion for the Keys

**Particular About What
 You Type On? Relax --
 You're Not Alone.**

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One thing I've learned: Hardware manufacturers may not have noticed, but we users care deeply about our keyboards. To be more specific, our keys.

Take Douglas Abrams, a 49-year-old American based in Singapore. Mr. Abrams's work may be cutting edge -- he runs an online bank called FirstMeta supplying credit cards to the users of virtual world SecondLife -- but his keyboard isn't. It's one of a pair of IBM Model M 1391401 keyboards he's been using since 1989 -- the year his chief operating officer, Aileen Sim, turned 6. She, by the way, is not impressed: As she taps away at his computer demonstrating how their MetaCard works in SecondLife, she complains loudly above the racket his keyboard makes.

Mr. Abrams is unrepentant: "Over that 18-year period," he says about the time he's used his IBM keyboard, "I have had more computers than I can count or remember, but I have never found a keyboard that compared to the IBM 1391401." Its main appeal? Exactly what drives the young Ms. Sim nuts: "The tactile feedback that I get when I type. It feels very firm when I press one of the keys and I can very clearly feel the keys snap back after pressing them," he says.


Mr. Abrams, it turns out, is not alone. The world is full of fans of the old-style keyboard. Indonesian entrepreneur Jerry Justianto swears by his IBM PS/2 System 70, from a line that was introduced in 1987, for similar reasons. So does Chris Riemer, a U.S.-based consultant: "It had just the right degree of resistance," he recalls, "and the right amount of click." Indonesian blogger Budi Putra loves the noise, too, and wishes that keyboard makers would "create a keyboard sound like the old machines." Not a bad idea.

The clicking sound they so love, by the way, is because of the "buckling spring" mechanism, where the spring buckles under pressure from your finger until a lever hits a sheet below.

This, according to a review of the IBM Model M keyboards by technology writer Daniel Rutter (www.dansdata.com¹), not only provides the reassuring sound but also ensures that the user knows when they've actually hit the key: "When you use a keyboard that doesn't have a good positive click," writes Mr. Rutter, "it's hard to tell when you've depressed a key properly." The buckling spring method, unfortunately, has long been replaced by the "rubber dome," where little sticks on the underside of the keys press down on rubber domes laid on a plastic underlay. This is why you don't hear so much clackety-clack in offices these days.

Of course, not all of us have seen the value of good keyboard action. As Mr. Rutter points out, in the days before mice, we, and manufacturers, tended to give a lot more thought to them. Nowadays, for many of us it's an afterthought, often after spending \$100 or so on a fancy mouse. Most of us think nothing of sitting in front of an office computer all day, our fingers dancing across a substandard

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keyboard that we would never think of replacing for a better one. According to a U.S.-based distributor of refurbished and unused Model M keyboards called clickykeyboards.com²: "The computer keyboard is among the most underappreciated components of the computer. In reality, the keyboard is the one part of the computer that gets the most physical contact."

The passion of Mr. Abrams and others woke me up to the fact that while we tend to focus on the look of a keyboard, it's the touch, response, action, whatever you want to call it, of the keys themselves that really matters. If we like the action, we like to type. I've long loved my ThinkPad keyboard, for example; it's probably no accident it was also designed by IBM, back when they owned the brand.

There are other options, and it's worth trying out a few to see whether they may suit you better than the one you've got. I admire Microsoft's keyboards, which are well designed and solid. My latest was a simple affair, less than \$15, with reassuringly tough keys and a good clickety-clack response. Sadly, I had to sacrifice that side of things when people I interviewed over the phone started asking what the weird rustling sound was -- turned out it was my typing their answers, the sound of which was getting picked up by my headset. It sounded, apparently, like a ship full of rats scurrying for the exit.

Instead I've opted for the diNovo Edge from Logitech, a company that has always pushed the boundaries between keyboard and command console. This one is black and sleek, and is the first keyboard I've tried that actually connects seamlessly by Bluetooth, as opposed to those that only claim to. It even comes with a sort of stand-alone slot to recharge the keyboard batteries. I'm not usually a fan of extraneous controls, but those on this model are quite useful: a slider you drag your finger along to change volume, and a circular pad you can use to scroll up or down pages with your finger. Not rocket science, but neat. Unfortunately the price isn't: Expect to pay at least \$150 for it. Still, it has great action and is about as quiet a keyboard as I've come across.

Sean Foley, a Laos-based consultant, has also found the Logitech diNovo keyboard the best of the bunch, so much so that he carries his "to and from the office each day and everywhere," he says. He's not alone in packing a keyboard: Phil Baker, a U.S.-based technology entrepreneur and columnist, says he carries "a full-size keyboard around with me because I prefer it over the laptop keyboard. But maybe I'm weird."

In a minority, yes. But not weird. Given how much time we spend on them, maybe a bit more passion about our keyboards from all of us wouldn't go amiss.

• **Email me** at jeremy@loose-wire.com³

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