



Family Connections

EDITOR'S INTRO

In this column, I focus on connected youth and their families. I look at two iPhone applications to help avoid the "are we there yet?" on long car rides and to help record memories of the places you'll visit this summer. The first application is effectively a reverse karaoke application: you sing; it accompanies. The second application creates panoramic images from sequences of individual images. Then I turn our attention to some new devices. We take a look at an e-reader; an Intel power management device; and the Microsoft Kin, a mobile phone that's connected to major social-networking sites.

Please continue to send pointers to upcoming products with exciting possibilities, your feedback on existing products, and your personal experiences with them. E-mail me at pvcproducts@computer.org.
—Maria Ebling

REVERSE KARAOKE

LaDiDa (<http://itunes.apple.com/us/app/ladida/id326533688?mt=8>), a new iPhone application, provides endless fun for wannabe pop stars. Kids and teens can sing a tune into their iPhone or iPod touch (see Figure 1), and LaDiDa will generate appropriate background music to accompany the tune. After selecting

Figure 1. Sing a tune into your iPhone or iPod touch; LaDiDa generates appropriate background music to accompany the tune.



the music style, tempo, amount of pitch correction, and reverb effect, the user sings the tune. LaDiDa records and then processes it. A few minutes later, the user can play the completed song.

After downloading this application and playing with it for a few days, both with my family and with some musician friends, I can attest that it is, at the least, amusing. The application seems to make too heavy a demand on the iPhone, which can result in awkward pauses during playback. Also, if you don't sing close enough to the microphone, it might not pick up your voice. Pitch correction improved my voice somewhat, but not enough for me to be willing to save anything I recorded.

The fun factor for teens depends greatly on their personality (specifically, their willingness to sing solo). The application has potential but needs a bit more maturity and power.

PANORAMAS MADE EASY

DeBacle Software's Pano (www.debaclesoftware.com) lets users take panoramic photos using an iPhone camera. The software offers a reasonably user-friendly interface, includ-

ing transparent lines to help align the individual shots forming the basis for the panorama. The individual photos then go through a three-step process that begins with aligning each adjacent photo. Next, Pano applies color-correction to correct for the camera's autoexposure and white balancing. It then blends the images into a nearly seamless whole and crops it into a nice, neat rectangle.

I tried it out on a recent foray to New York City, taking panoramic photos of Riverside Church. The results (see Figure 2) are pretty impressive, given that I'm neither an experienced photographer nor an expert user. A friend's middle-school-aged daughter also tried it out with great success.

THE LIBRARY OF ALEXANDRIA IN YOUR POCKET

Teenagers and even younger children carry unreasonably heavy backpacks. The sheer number and size of the textbooks are astounding. Nerdy parents have been looking at electronic books as one possible solution to the problem, but nothing has yet made this a reality. In recent months, however, we've been getting closer to the dream.

Overshadowed by the media frenzy surrounding the iPad, Spring Design (www.springdesign.com) recently began offering the Alex eReader (see Figure 3). Alex is an Android device that offers two independent displays. The first, a 3.5" LCD display, offers full color and a touch screen. The second, a 6" electronic-paper display, supports paper-like reading comfort.

Alex stores digital books, images, videos, and music on a removable SD

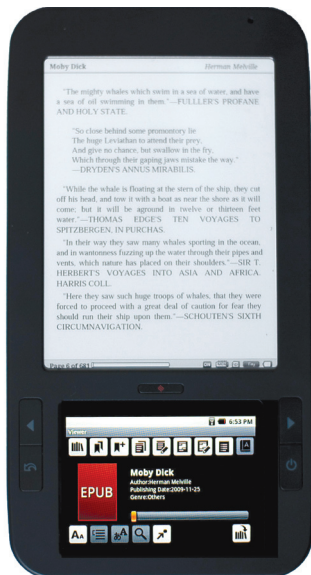


Figure 2. Pano combines multiple iPhone photographs into a seamless panorama.

(Secure Digital) card. It uses the Adobe EPUB format and allows downloads from Google Books and other partner bookstores. Users can highlight text, record voice comments, and add hyperlinks to the material. Like the iPad, Alex comes in different models. The Wi-Fi version is available on the Web for \$399; EVDO/CDMA (Evolution-Data Optimized/Code Division Multiple Access) and HSPA/GSM (High-Speed Packet Access/Global System for Mobile Communications) versions are scheduled to ship sometime this summer.

Of course, as interesting as the Alex eReader might be, I'm not yet convinced it'll stand up to the abuse my children dish out.

Figure 3. The Alex eReader stores and displays digital books, images, videos, and music. Users can highlight text, record voice comments, and add hyperlinks to the material.



POWER OVER POWER

This review is for the parents—Intel recently demonstrated a device that plugs into an outlet and monitors power use by all the gadgets and appliances in the home, from refrigerators to game consoles. The sensor can tell which appliances are being turned on and off on the basis of their unique electricity usage signatures. With this information, the system simply logs the time on and time off, which allows calculations of what hours a device is running and what lights were left on at what times.

This device lets you monitor your kids' energy consumption as well as game use. I'm intrigued by its possibilities because I'm constantly reminding my kids to turn off lights. What if I could give them an energy target and then charge them out of their allowance for exceeding it? It also helps you find ways to reduce your energy use—for example, you can see the effect of using cold water versus hot water in the washing machine.

Intel has made no announcements as to availability or expected cost.

KIN FOR TWEENS AND TEENS

Microsoft has announced the perfect phone, dubbed "Kin," for teens or tweens. It isn't a smart phone and you can't install apps on it, but it's a big leap over a dumb phone in that it's plugged into Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace. It's designed to make sharing photos and videos easy.

There are actually two versions of the Kin—Kin One and Kin Two. (Of course, I can't say these without thinking about Dr. Seuss, but I digress.) Kin One is a square slider phone with a 320 × 240-pixel screen, a 5-Mpixel camera,

a VGA video recorder, and 4 Gbytes of nonexpandable storage. Kin Two is a rectangular slider phone with a 480 × 320 screen, an 8-Mpixel camera, a 720p video recorder, and 8 Gbytes of nonexpandable storage (see Figure 4).

Kin offers three features: Loop, Spot, and Studio. Loop is a live feed of your friends' status updates, integrated from all three major social-networking sites. Spot is literally a spot, at the bottom of the screen, where you drag the things you want to share and the people you want to share them with. Once you've done that, Kin sends the material over the medium of your choice, and—voilà—you're done. Finally, Studio is the backup site for all your stuff. Everything on your Kin phone is on your webpage so that, even if you lose your phone, you don't lose your stuff. The biggest omission in features seems to be a YouTube connection.


Kin is being sold in the US through Verizon and should be available in Europe this fall through Vodafone. Kin One retails for US\$50, while Kin Two costs \$100. 

Figure 4. Kin One (right) and Kin Two (left) are phones plugged into Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace. They're designed to make sharing photos and videos easy.

