



Enterprise Hardware

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Big Easy brushes up on Bluetooth



NEW ORLEANS--X-TraFun has done something a lot of people didn't think was possible: It's made a compelling Bluetooth application.

The Castle Rock, Colo.-based company is showing off a plug-in module that effectively turns a Nintendo Game Boy Advance into a wireless mobile device for kids at WinHEC, Microsoft's annual hardware confab, which takes place here this week.

The module--which contains a specially made chip, a Bluetooth radio and a slot for a Secure Digital memory card--plugs into the slot in the Game Boy where the games go. It allows people to send and receive e-mail, download games, read Web content and play interactive board game-style games like Battleship when used with a PC.

Overall, it works like a remote screen, similar to the Smart Displays released earlier by ViewSonic and others. The PC connects to the Internet and the X-TraFun device, then scrapes data off the PC through a wireless Bluetooth connection.

The key difference is that Smart Displays cost more than \$1,000. The X-TraFun cartridge will cost around \$49 when it comes out this holiday season, according to its maker, and fits into a popular device a lot of kids already own.

"Nintendo sells 25,000 Game Boys a day. They've sold 120 million already," said Mark Kramer, CEO of Blue Radios, which owns X-TraFun. The company, Kramer said, is currently taking meetings with AOL Time Warner and the pharmaceutical giant Abbot Laboratories. Kids with diabetes could use the module to transmit their glucose readings to a parent, Kramer said.

An audio application for making phone calls is in the works, he added. We, the panel of product judges selected by the Bluetooth Special Interest Group at WinHEC, voted it best Bluetooth product of the show. ("It seems inspired by King Harald himself," said one reviewer, referring to the 10th-century Viking leader who gave the technology his name.)

The whole enchilada

It is products like this that keep conventions like WinHEC interesting. Too often, conventions serve as showcases for prototypes that were displayed at earlier shows. For years, prototype Web tablets were a staple at WinHEC. Attendees scoffed at the industrial design and limited real-world functionality. Some didn't have hard drives; some weighed too much; others looked like something you'd use to check

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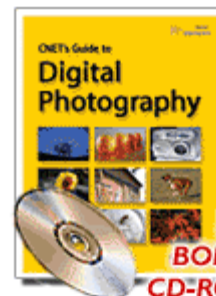
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the inventory of Slim Jims at a convenience store.

But hardware is like Mexican food. The ingredients in different dishes are generally the same--it is just a matter of how you combine them.

Eventually, the [tablet PC](#) showed up in late 2002. It weighed four pounds or less, could function like a notebook, and came with working handwriting-recognition software. So far, sales are beating modest expectations.

That's the good news. The less-exciting news is that there are a lot of recipes that don't seem to satisfy any particular appetite. At this WinHEC, Sony showed off how a Bluetooth module in a PC can let users download pictures from a Bluetooth camera. It works, but so does a USB (universal serial bus) cord.

Another company demonstrated how a Bluetooth-enabled notebook could be used to control a Bluetooth-enabled DVD player. In other words, the notebook performs the same function as the remote that comes in the box with the player, but costs \$1,499.

Japan's TDK showed off software that effectively let consumers connect laptops to the Internet using a Bluetooth-enabled phone as a modem. But as Wi-Fi can be used to directly connect notebooks to the Internet, is there a market for this? Sure, said the TDK representative. What if you need Web access on the freeway between Houston and New Orleans, where hot-spot coverage might be spotty? A good answer, but the compulsion doesn't come up that often.

"In Japan, Bluetooth is huge," said one company representative, whose comments were echoed by others. "It's just not big in the U.S. yet."

Nonetheless, the potential is there. Last year, 25 million Bluetooth phones were shipped, according to TDK--about 4 percent of the 600 million cell phones shipped worldwide. At the moment, around 1 million Bluetooth handsets leave factories each week--a clip that's twice as fast as last year's. The wireless networking technology is also superior to its more glamorous cousin Wi-Fi in a variety of ways (especially in power consumption), and the infrastructure exists in many countries. So who knows?

Like many other conventions, WinHEC has seen its attendance fall dramatically. A few major vendors such as chipmaker Advanced Micro Devices are here, but many of the exhibitors are smaller companies. The product exhibition floor occupied about one-third of Hall H in the Morial Convention Center in New Orleans--the rest is given up to dining tables. (A group from the beverage industry is holding a separate convention in the same building.) Look beneath the "Ask the Microsoft Experts" banner, and you'll find a tray of pastries.

[Michael Kanellos](#), News.com Senior Editor

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