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**Hardware**

**Virtual Keyboard allows typing anywhere**

By [John G. Spooner](#)  
Special to ZDNet News  
May 14, 2002, 1:50 PMPT

Call it typing the light fantastic.

Start-up Virtual Devices has developed a flashlight-size gadget that projects an image of a keyboard on any surface and lets people input data by typing on the image.

The company's Virtual Keyboard is designed for anyone who's become frustrated with trying to peck information into a handheld but doesn't want to schlepp a notebook computer around. It uses cameras to track the location of a person's fingers in relation to a map of a full-sized keyboard.

The company announced the device Tuesday.

Handheld manufacturers "have saturated the market for people who just want address books," said Virtual Devices chief technical officer Steve Montellese. He thinks the Virtual Keyboard could help lift sales in the slowing PDA (personal digital assistant) market. Handheld makers, he said, will have to make it easier to enter data into a PDA before people will leave their notebook PCs behind and carry only a handheld.

At this point, Virtual Devices plans to sell its gadget as a standalone unit. But it's also in discussions with device makers to incorporate it into handhelds, smart phones as well as PDAs, Montellese said.

Depending on the timing of these deals, Montellese said, the Virtual Keyboard may debut first in a device. Either way, "one will be out later this year."

A standalone version of the keyboard would cost between \$100 and \$150, Montellese said.

The Virtual Devices product plan is yet another in the quest for a portable keyboard that will let people extend the usefulness of their PDAs. The company Think Outside, for example, has dished up a foldable keyboard.



Virtual Devices' gadget projects a keyboard that can be used to send data to a PDA.

And other companies have taken the virtual approach. Start-up Senseboard Technologies, for example, is working on a keyboard that uses sensors and pattern-recognition software to determine what a person is typing. Samsung's Scurry, demonstrated at last year's fall Comdex trade show, uses motion sensors too.

But Montellese said the keyboard quest is only one approach to simplifying data entry. The other, being explored by the likes of IBM and Microsoft, is speech recognition. However, "I don't expect either one will win," Montellese said. Instead, he believes most handhelds will be modified to accommodate both methods.

Meanwhile, companies like IBM are hedging their bets in the market for portable computing devices with various research and development projects. IBM Research has cooked up the Meta Pad, a 9-ounce, wallet-size modular PC. The MetaPad basically contains the vital organs of a PC, such parts as the processing unit, or CPU, along with a hard drive and memory. Users then add modules to convert the device into a handheld, notebook or desktop.

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