Single Handed

The Microwriter is a portable word processor that can be operated with only one hand. The six-button keyboard may soon be used on computers

Having a word processor at the office, or a home computer with a word processing program, can be an excellent idea. Apart from taking the drudgery out of producing routine paperwork and letters, they can help with program documentation, quickly produce copies of notices, or handle the contents of an address book. Indeed, they can become so useful that whenever anything needs to be written down, your fingers will tend to drift toward the keyboard rather than pen and paper. A problem arises, however, when you want to take notes away from the home or office in a form that a computer can understand.

There is a growing market in portable computer systems like Tandy's Model 100 and the Epson HX-20. While these have the advantage of being able to act as portable word processors, or remote terminals for bigger systems, they are hardly as handy as a notepad or dictaphone. What about a word processing system that is small enough to carry in your pocket? A system so compact that it is battery powered and only needs one hand to use, yet can be connected to a printer or even another computer.

Such a device, called a Microwriter, has been available for nearly four years. Originally conceived by Cy Endfield, an expatriate American, it shuns the QWERTY keyboard in favour of a unique system of multiple key presses using only six push-button keys. The concept first arose out of a desire to create a hand-held game based on words, for which even a miniature keyboard would be both too big and too expensive. The obvious answer was to create a special kind of keyboard that used just a few keys with enough combinations to specify all the alphanumeric symbols. The breakthrough came with the invention of a symbolic code system that's unique to the Microwriter.

At first sight it seems impossible that the letters of the alphabet, not to mention numeric and punctuation symbols, can be created by combinations of just six keys, but these are indeed sufficient. And a few hours is all it takes to learn the common combinations. Indeed, the makers claim, with some justification, that it is a lot easier to learn than a QWERTY keyboard. The combination of keys required for each of the letters is based on the physical shape of the letter, a code that is often found easier to learn by non-typists. Because only one hand is needed, the Microwriter also opens the way to word processing for those disabled people who can't handle the multiple key presses often needed on a conventional keyboard to generate commands.