

FROM THE DESK OF DAVID POGUE

A Funny Looking Keyboard That's Very, Very Comfortable

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Anyone who comes into New York Times Labs (as I facetiously call the cluttered, cable-strewn home office in my attic) always has the same reaction to the contraption on my desk. "What is THAT thing?" they inevitably exclaim.

"That thing" is my keyboard, which looks less like a keyboard and more like a Medieval torture device. It's called the Comfort Keyboard (www.comfortkeyboard.com).

The concept, though, is ingenious. Start with an anodized black aluminum track about 18 inches long. In this track, place three keyboard sections: left hand, right hand, numeric keypad. Because they're on a track, you can space them however you like. You can also swap their positions, putting the number pad on the left (for lefties) or even in the middle.

Each keyboard section is also on a universal joint that goes up or down, and tilts at any angle. When you have it positioned in space the way you like it, you twist a gear to freeze the section into place.

To me, this arrangement makes infinite sense. After all, the design of the usual flat keyboard seems to assume that your arms sprout from the center of your chest, and makes your hands adopt a sort of weird, crampy angle. (I keep my keyboard halves shoulder width apart, separated by over a foot.)

Nor do your hands naturally assume a position parallel to the floor-another contortion demanded by the standard keyboard. (I have my keyboard halves nearly vertical, as though I'm playing an accordion.)

The world is full of ergonomic keyboards, of course. Some take baby steps at angling or keyboard-half separation, but few approach the complete separation of this contraption.

Now, I wouldn't recommend this keyboard for just anyone; I'm a special case. Since 1995, I've suffered from a nasty wrist ailment called tenosynovitis (think carpal tunnel syndrome, but without the option of surgery as a last resort). I licked it, for the most part, by adopting speech-recognition software for dictating book chapters, e-mail responses, and other long stretches. I use the keyboard only for typing short bursts, like addresses and, sometimes, this column. (I use ScanSoft's Dragon NaturallySpeaking 7 for Windows, which is great. Note to Mac fans: Alas, neither ViaVoice for Macintosh nor iListen is anywhere near as good.)

Note, furthermore, that I'm careful not to describe my ailment as a repetitive-stress syndrome (RSI). The two hand surgeons in my family (wife and brother-in-law) have taught me to be careful about the popular assumption that bodily pains necessarily stem from computer keyboarding. The whole computer-pain relationship is fraught with passion and highly controversial, both inside and outside the medical profession. Stress, hormones, age, sleeping position, and genetics all play a part, but, as the National Institutes of Health puts it, "There is little clinical data to prove whether repetitive and forceful movements of the hand and wrist during work or leisure activities can cause carpal tunnel syndrome." I do know, though, that using a normal flat keyboard even for two minutes makes my wrists start to ache, and that for me, this weird, ugly, split-keyboard design is infinitely more comfortable. (Speaking of weird and ugly: When you see the

company's Web site, it's clear that they put their engineering expertise into building keyboards, and not into learning about Web design.)

The keyboard is available with USB or PS2 connectors, works with Mac or Windows, and costs \$300. Yep, that's a lot for a keyboard-but it's a lot cheaper than the hand therapist I had to see for a year!