Harmony Remotes To Include Speech Recognition, Search

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The future of the universal remote control includes voice recognition, search and biometrics, the founder of Logitech's Harmony business unit said Thursday.

Meanwhile, the word at the Connections show here is that a number of smaller remote-control manufacturers will begin announcing their own remotes in the second quarter that are based on SideShow, a Microsoft Vista technology that allows a secondary remote display.

The future of remote controls emerged during a panel discussion attempting to root out the "Google of the home": or searching the hundreds and thousands of digital media files stored on a number of home devices. The living-room remote control has always been a traditional shortcut to that content, even if it has been simply scrolling through dozens of TV channels or punching "Play" on a DVD.

Now, with a variety of prerecorded, archived and "live" media on the Internet, the role of the remote control has become much more complicated. Microsoft's vision has oriented itself around the PC, using Media Center PCs and now Vista as a gateway and GUI to manage the content. But other paradigms, such as the DLNA and HANA digital networks, think of the TV as the locus of the connected home.

In some ways, the next-generation remote was prompted by TiVo, which invented the PVR, added a "thumbs-up, thumbs-down" approval feature, tied in recommendations, and then, through a partnership with

Amazon.com, began offering consumers content from the Web that could be downloaded to about 640,000 TiVos that are connected via broadband. "The amount of available content is just exploding," said Tara Maitra, vice president and general manager of programming for TiVo, at the conference.

At that point, William "Bill" Leszinske Jr., general manager of Intel's Consumer Electronics Group, noted that he had seen several demonstrations of remotes with speech recognition built in, as a way of bypassing on-screen keypads and laborious scrolling when searching for content.

It wasn't until later, however, that Bryan McLeod, vice president of the Harmony remote-control business unit at Logitech, revealed that it was his company that was planning at least one of the voice-activated remotes. Logitech acquired Intrigue Technologies, which manufactures the Harmony remotes, in 2004.

The current Harmony remote control allows a user to control many different components and functions within the home, including audio and video components and lighting. A more advanced version, the Harmony 1000, is shaped more like a small PDA, complete with an LCD screen.

"We're looking at bringing voice recognition into remote controls," McLeod said during a panel discussion. "We're currently only looking at it on our most powerful platform, the Harmony 1000, which has a touchscreen remote control. It works pretty well; it's pretty interesting." The device uses IBM's ViaVoice recognition software as its backend control, he said.

Within Logitech's Harmony division, engineers are attempting to "flatten" the control interface, requiring fewer clicks to dig out what the

user is attempting to do. Part of the mechanism is speech recognition, which acts as a shortcut: fast-forwarding a DVD, for example, instead of clicking over to the DVD control mechanism, then skipping forward.

While that may sound simple enough, controlling a home network and the devices on it isn't. In this model, users are likely searching for something: a movie, a picture, or a song. That means more clicks.

Future versions of the Harmony remote will integrate search, which McLeod said the company plans to tweak as well. Instead of a search box and a list of results and devices, Harmony's working on simple voice commands: "Play 'Audioslave'," for example, will command the remote to automatically search and access a remote drive, iTunes shared folder, PC, or other device to find and begin playing the Audioslave track, without necessarily asking the user where it might be found, McLeod said.

And that, in turn, means that future Harmony remotes will require some sort of IP connection, most likely Wi-Fi, McLeod added.

When asked about the problem of digital-rights-management interfering with that vision, McLeod said that the "Internet business model has to conform to using your content on your device."

But families also have to consider restricting adult content to underage kids as well. In that vein, Logitech is testing biometrics, such as a fingerprint reader, to allow the remote to automatically lock or unlock appropriate content, but automatically load selected preferences, much like a preset car seat automatically sets itself to accommodate a new driver.

Unfortunately, McLeod said he couldn't reveal when the new technologies would manifest themselves. "I really shouldn't have said

anything," he admitted to a reporter. "But I just couldn't help it."

Hillcrest Labs, a startup whose "bracelet mouse" for living-room PCs or set-tops wowed attendees, also said it is looking at biometrics as a solution to identify individual users. The mouse is simply that, a Nintendo Wii-like device that adjusts a pointer on the display depending on how the user moves his or her wrist. According to Andy Addis, the executive vice president of marketing for Hillcrest, individual users have a unique tremor in their hand and wrist, that the pointing device instinctively compensates for. That tremor could be used to identify users and load preferences, he said.

Meanwhile, other sources attending the panel discussion said that a number of smaller, lesser-known remote-control manufacturers planned to announce remotes based on the Vista "SideShow" technology during the second quarter. An announcement by Microsoft at its Windows Hardware Engineering (WinHEC) show is likely, they speculated.

SideShow is a feature of the Vista operating system that allows a second display to be used. Typically, that second display has been used as an adjunct for a notebooks main display, used to indicate what song the notebook is playing when the main display is closed or turned off, for example. It was unclear what technology the new remotes will use to communicate with the living-room PC.

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