With bendable mouse, Microsoft adds artistic touch to stable of devices

May 13 2011, By Sharon Pian Chan

When people pick up Microsoft's Arc Touch Mouse, it's as if they've picked up a toy. The pop-up mouse curls and flattens, and they instinctively begin snapping it back and forth.

Microsoft has been chanting for two years that it wants its products to "delight" people. Delight is not the most common reaction to Windows.

But, with the Arc Touch Mouse, it seems to have achieved its goal.

"It's not just a gadget. It's a piece of jewelry that's perfectly put together," said Young Kim, the designer behind the mouse, which started selling in December for $70.

It's strange to think of Microsoft taking baby steps, but that's what this diminutive mouse represents to an elephant.

Form long has been an afterthought to function at Microsoft, which for decades delegated design to PC makers such as Dell and Hewlett-Packard. The result: The company has become crusty in a design-savvy world, left in the dust by Apple's sleek iPhone and iPad. In part, that's why Apple's market cap - its shares outstanding multiplied by its stock price - is now more than $100 billion higher than Microsoft's.

One of Microsoft's recent device carcasses is the Zune, the music player meant to compete with Apple's iPod. Microsoft pulled the plug on the Zune in March.

Kim is a senior user-experience designer in Microsoft's Hardware group, which makes mice, Web cameras and keyboards.

Known for his ability to solve knotty problems with clever solutions, Kim started building the Arc Touch Mouse two years ago. He's better known by his alias "youngki."

Despite his artfully arranged bedhead, he's down-to-earth in a place where design arrogance can be common, lighthearted where company fights can be furious.

"Are we trying to design something cool or something that people can actually use? Product design gets mistaken for something that looks

good," Kim said. "What's most important is figuring out what kind of problem you need to solve."

His team went to a Seattle coffee shop and to the University of Washington campus to observe how people used their laptops. They noticed most portable mice were too small to maneuver, but a full-sized mouse was too bulky to pack.

The Arc Touch Mouse, which curls for use and flattens for travel, was the answer. Tech reviewers have complimented its unique design. Microsoft declined to disclose sales numbers, but the device is ranked No. 10 among computer mice on Amazon.com.

Kim, 29, believes hope springs eternal for design, even at Microsoft. "We can take a traditional, somewhat stale category and when you have the right group of obsessive people, you can do some really cool stuff," he said.

He is one of 35 industrial designers at a company with more than 88,000 employees.

"We're people designing plastics, not pixels," Kim said.

There was a time when even Microsoft employees didn't realize the company made hardware. That's changed - especially with the success of the Xbox - but Microsoft remains first and foremost a software company.

"You can release software, then release a patch," said Dan O'Neil, a former Microsoft Hardware designer and Kim co-worker now working at Dell as a senior lead industrial designer. "With hardware, you've really got to get it right. There's capital investment and tooling investment in Asia. You can't hide anything when you're designing hardware.

"Getting the culture to understand that and the value of hardware is still probably a challenge at Microsoft, but I think they've made huge strides."

In Microsoft's Hardware design workshop, windowless rooms are littered with foam cores that designers carve with X-acto knives. A 3-D printer builds objects by printing multiple layers of plastic on top of one another. Another room has a table saw and a jigsaw.

"We spend a lot of time arguing over even a 0.1-millimeter gap," Kim said.

On a wall, the team hangs design guideposts - copies of PowerPoint slides that have key words and photos on them. One says "clean aesthetic" next to a photo of a curvy electric tea kettle.

"It's clean and soft at the same time," Kim said. "It's not just gooey like Play-Doh. You have to have a level of confidence."

He uses the words "clean and soft" to describe a simple pasta dish at Spinasse, a restaurant on Capitol Hill. "Sometimes you go to a restaurant, and the plate is covered with parsley and all this stuff. It shows insecurity," Kim said. "They have a buttered sage pasta. It's just a handful of noodles that is awesome."

The rigor and discipline required to make hardware is not always appreciated at a company made up of software engineers.

Two years ago, Kim said, "We met with the engineering team and we said, 'We want something that is going to go from flat to curved repeatedly.' They were like, 'No way.'"

Growing up in South Korea, Kim said, the prevailing thought was that

you couldn't make a living doing art. His father, a business owner, nevertheless suggested he find an art school. Kim moved to Pasadena, Calif., to attend the Art Center College of Design.

After graduating with a bachelor's degree in product design, he worked at a small design-consulting firm in Santa Monica called Ashcraft Designs. He introduced the designers there to Korean barbecue and soju, a Korean vodka distilled from rice.

The first thing he worked on was a speaker that he couldn't even afford to buy. "It was $300, but it was still too much for me," he said.

He was looking through the Microsoft jobs website and saw a listing with the Microsoft Research group to design objects. He thought a company like Microsoft would have a lot more resources to work with, and so he joined as an intern.

Greg Jones, principal design manager at Microsoft's Interactive Entertainment business, hired Kim in 2004. "He's someone we kind of identified early as a real strong designer on the team," Jones said. "In addition to the design, it was his ability to think about how the product would be used. ... He has really clever ways of thinking through that."

Some designers can be pushy, Jones said, but Kim is not. "He really has a kind of lightheartedness but also a humbleness to his work," Jones said.

Kim now manages a team, after working in China between 2008 and 2010 setting up a design studio to work on the ground with electronics manufacturers.

Dell's O'Neil says he remembers spending hours sketching designs with Kim.

Once, the two were designing a new webcam and struggling with how to attach it to the laptop.

"Young's approach was to make a little magnetic dot that would adhere to the back of the laptop," O'Neil said. "It was just a more elegant way to solve it. That's kind of the angle - finding that nice, simple, pure, core idea. That's where Young's strengths are."

YOUNG KIM:

-Age: 29

-Position: Senior user experience designer in Microsoft Hardware group

-Residence: Bellevue

-Hometown: Seoul, South Korea

-Family: Married to Jena Kim, a former retail manager now studying to become a pastry chef

-Experience: Industrial design manager in Microsoft Hardware group; industrial design intern at Microsoft Research; junior industrial designer at Ashcraft Design

-Education: Bachelor's degree in product design from Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, Calif.

DESIGN INSPIRATIONS:

Young Kim considers these his top five design inspirations:

-Plus Minus Zero: He likes the Japanese product company for what he calls its simple, elegant and poetic designs.

-Miele products: He likes Miele's attention to fit, finish and sound. He especially likes its coffee machine and the hinges on its refrigerators.

-Leica M9 camera: He likes the details that draw people in and the sound of the dial clicks.

-Deiter Rams: Former designer for Braun, Rams is a hero to many designers.

-EBOY digital graphic art: Kim likes its city posters for Los Angeles and New York.

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