

A device attempts to elevate the iPad's keyboard

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Even if you love the iPad, you're probably not keen to write your next novel using its on-screen virtual keyboard. You may not be thrilled to type up a lengthy email with it, either.

Steve Isaac felt the same way. A Seattle-based software designer who worked on an early tablet at computing startup Go in the '90s, Isaac was

delighted when the iPad came out last year. He loved its svelteness, [battery life](#) and [wireless connectivity](#).

"The iPad was amazing," he says. "It just did everything super, super well."

Well, almost everything. Though its touch-screen keyboard was miles ahead of what he'd seen on past tablets, he felt it still wasn't great for typing. And wireless keyboards that work via Bluetooth seemed too bulky.

So Isaac got to work on a way to make the iPad easier to type on - a stretchy silicone keyboard called the TouchFire that sits atop the tablet's on-screen keyboard when the device is turned on its side.

Isaac isn't unique in coming up with this type of device, but his [invention](#) has garnered an intense amount of support through Kickstarter - a website where entrepreneurs and artists solicit funding for their projects and often give rewards in exchange, such as a limited-edition poster or first version of a product.

In Isaac's case, he turned to the site to raise money to turn his prototype into a real device, offering the first run of TouchFires to Kickstarter backers. His effort raised \$201,400 by the time it ended last week. That was more than 20 times the \$10,000 that he and his business partner had hoped to snag.

The TouchFire's birth as a consumer product shows the growing importance of sites such as Kickstarter. They offer a new way to finance bright ideas and usher them to the masses. Kickstarter visitors can search through a bevy of proposals for everything from graphic novels to consumer electronics, coming from creators who must meet their stated

funding goal in a specified period of time in order to actually use the money.

About 45 percent of the projects meet or exceed their goals, Kickstarter said. This year, site visitors pledged about \$79 million to projects that either succeeded, including Isaac's, or were still in the process of soliciting funds.

The response to the TouchFire in particular indicates that, despite the tough economy, people are interested in shelling out for ideas they believe in - something that benefits both consumers and entrepreneurs.

"It sure makes us feel very good about the potential for this project and the demand for this project," Isaac says.

It's validation for a year and a half's worth of work. Not long after the iPad came out in April 2010, Isaac started fashioning prototypes by cutting up transparent silicone laptop keyboard covers (the kind you use to protect a laptop's keyboard from dirt) and thin sheets of silicone.

He had a number of stipulations for the TouchFire: It should somehow work with the iPad's existing on-screen keyboard and have springy "keys" that you could actually feel. It had to be small, light and unobtrusive. It needed to respond to your finger taps, but, as on a hardware keyboard, be insensitive enough that you could rest your fingers on the keys without triggering the typing of random letters.

Last September, he connected with Brad Melmon, an industrial designer who was also based in Seattle. The duo refined Isaac's original idea and created the TouchFire company together.

A TouchFire prototype Isaac recently brought to The Associated Press' San Francisco office looked deceptively simple. On the surface, it

appeared to be just a flexible keyboard cover with some rigid plastic on the sides.

But a closer look revealed small bumps on the underside of the keypad's silicone keys - bumps that provide typing fingers with the proper amount of resistance. Magnets on the sides and the bottom adhere it to the magnetic portions of the face of the iPad 2, allowing it to sit right on top of the on-screen [virtual keyboard](#) without sliding around. If you use the original iPad, a non-slip layer on the bottom of the TouchFire helps keep it in place.

Typing with it was fairly comfortable, though it would take some getting used to its squishy feel (a more apt name might be SquishyType).

Creating a functional prototype like this was just the first step, though. Isaac and Melmon needed funding to make their idea into a consumer product. So after briefly looking for outside investors, they turned to Kickstarter in October.

Not every idea makes it through KickStarter's application process, which is required before you can start seeking funds through the site. The TouchFire was initially rejected - Isaac suspects their pitch wasn't demonstrative enough. But after adding a video that showed it in action, KickStarter approved the application and added it to the site on Oct. 20.

Isaac and Melmon hoped to raise \$10,000 by the campaign's Dec. 13 deadline by offering a TouchFire to anyone who pledged at least \$45 - about the same price they eventually hope to sell them at in stores.

This wasn't a problem. By the fifth day of their Kickstarter campaign, they reached their goal. In the final seven days, the project had snagged more than \$167,000 in funding. Isaac says he now expects to ship more than 5,000 TouchFires to Kickstarter backers.

Marci Liroff is one of the excited buyers. Liroff, a Los Angeles-based casting director and producer who successfully funded one of her own films through Kickstarter, uses an iPad for nearly everything. But she turns to a laptop if she wants to write more than a simple [email](#) - she finds it too difficult to do so on the iPad. Liroff hopes the TouchFire changes that (and she jokes that if it does, she'll never have to leave the couch again).

"I just thought it was a really brilliant idea," she says.

Not everyone is convinced, though. Gartner Research analyst Ken Dulaney is skeptical that the TouchFire will appeal to the masses, saying it doesn't really seem different from the scads of wireless keyboards already available for the tablet.

"I can tell you, you just need to go down the Apple Store to see how littered the market is for keyboards for iPads," he says.

Indeed, there are tons of options available to iPad users, from cases with built-in keyboards to stand-alone keyboards that sit next to the [iPad](#).

Isaac is optimistic, though. He and Melmon are deciding on a manufacturer to make the device, and Isaac said they're likely to ship the TouchFires to donors in January. After that, they hope to make the devices available for sale as soon as possible.

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