

Friday, August 18, 2006

Nike+iPod Goodness

On a whim I picked up the Nike+iPod doodad the other day and this morning did my first decent run with it and I am quite impressed. I'm not much of an Apple nor Nike fan. I do have a Powerbook, but doubt I would buy another one (see previous Toys entry), but this little device is definitely cool. It is going to make me run further and faster and at a more consistent pace. If you already have a Nano you really should pick one up. It's only \$29, \$27 if you work somewhere where you get the Employee discount. Even if you aren't a runner, this works perfectly well for walking as well. Even if you don't have a Nano, you can pick one up for \$108 in the refurbished section of the Apple store right now. Refurbished Apple items seem to be indistinguishable from new items in my experience.

It comes as two tiny devices. Doodad1 and Doodad2. Doodad1 you attach to your Nano as pictured on the right. It only comes in white so it doesn't match my black Nano all that well. Not that I care. Doodad2 you attach securely to your shoe. It should be on tightly such that it moves with your foot and doesn't dangle in a pouch or something. You can of course buy the \$100 Nike+ shoes which I am sure is the goal of this, but I find it works perfectly well stuffed under my sock on top of my foot with the laces tight below and above it. I don't feel it and it seems to be very accurate measuring distances. It uses some sort of piezoelectric accelerometer, like in a speaker, to measure the amount of time your foot spends on the ground combined with the time between foot strikes to figure out how fast and how far you are running. After I calibrated mine over a 1 mile distance it seems to be very accurate. I tried running 400 meters with long strides and then the same 400m with short strides and it didn't get confused. Walking the same 400m it managed to measure accurately as well. EEtimes had a good article on it.

The guts of the Doodads look like the image below.

While you are running the screen shows your progress. Distance, pace and time. If you hit the center button it will use either a male or a female voice to tell you the same information so you don't need to look at your screen. If you choose a set distance for your workout it will tell you that you are "halfway", "400 meters to go", "300 meters to go"... I thought it was interesting that it used meters even though I have mine set to give me everything in miles. I go both ways on the miles/meters thing so I don't care, but I could see someone being confused by that. When you finish your workout and you have beaten your previous best time or distance record you get a little congratulatory voice by Lance Armstrong or a couple of others, I think. I have only gotten Lance so far.

You then plug your iPod back into your computer and it uploads (if you let it) your workout to the Nike+ site. This site has a very nice Flash app (for some definition of nice tempered by the fact that it is Flash) which keeps track of your runs. It's a very shiny app that shows each individual run with time, distance, pace and calories burned (you enter your weight during setup).

The yellow line shows your speed during a run. The dots along the run there appear to be the times I pressed the center button to hear my progress. When you mouse over them in the app you see the distance and pace at that point. The speed seems to match my mental state and the hills along the run pretty well. And I find it really nice to be able to quickly check if I am falling behind the pace I know I can run. It is too easy to trick yourself into believing you are running at your optimal pace.

There is an overview screen where you see your runs. I have only done 2 so far. A short 1 mile run to check the calibration and then this morning's 10km run. When you mouse over the bars it gives you the details on each run.

And there is a summary screen showing your farthest run, best 1mi, 5km and 10km runs.

There are also ways to set goals and to create groups where I assume you can see other peoples' runs and motivate each other to run more that way. I don't know anybody else with one of these yet, so I haven't played with that feature. Perhaps we need to set up a running group for fat grumpy open source developers. It might help turn us into just grumpy open source developers. My wife showed an immediate interest in it as well, but it doesn't support multiple

Blog Export: Rasmus' Toys Page, <http://toys.lerdorf.com/>

profiles on the same sensor. You can however have multiple sensors and share the same iPod, so I already ordered another \$27 sensor for her.

Posted by Rasmus in Audio/Video at 09:25

Sunday, August 13, 2006

Time to buy a Thinkpad again?

About 18 months ago I had a very nice perfectly configured Debian T42p Thinkpad stolen at a conference. I had less than two weeks before the next conference and I didn't have time to fiddle with my OS to get a new Thinkpad up and running with Debian. It also annoyed me that there was no way to buy a new Thinkpad without paying Microsoft for yet another Windows XP license I would never use. So I swallowed some Open Source pride and bought a Powerbook G4. It took a bit of getting used to, but overall it was a pleasant experience for a while. It was a Unix laptop which just worked and I was up and running quickly.

The Powerbook hasn't done so well over time though. It is not nearly robust enough for my hectic travel schedule which include plenty of mad dashes through airports in strange countries. The clasp to hold it closed broke long ago. The power plug thing is so bent out of shape it won't hold the power connector solidly. These two factors probably contributed to my battery completely dying after about a year and I had to replace it. Also, whenever I put it down the CD Rom tries to eject a non-existent disk, and the screen has a long dent in it which causes a dark area on the display. The cheap silver paint has rubbed off the case where my wrist rests, the key labels are disappearing and my cursor-left key isn't there anymore. Half the time it won't come out of sleep mode requiring a reboot and the other half it simply turns itself off. It also gets amazingly hot. I do have full Appicare on it, but it doesn't appear like they will fix any of this stuff because the 4 or 5 big dents in it is obvious signs of it being dropped and they state they won't fix damage due to a drop.

I have of course been eyeing the new MacBookPro, but I see no signs that it would be any more robust. And even worse, now with their Intel move they are using Intel's Trusted Computing Platform for who knows what. I haven't seen much on what they are doing with the TPM beyond tying the OS to the hardware, but since they are not a member of the Trusted Computing Group there is no oversight. I also find myself using very little Apple software. It is shiny and pretty for the most part, but not really something an old UNIX hack like me would use on a day to day basis. Compiling things on a G4 is painful. gcc and gdb do work, but Valgrind and Callgrind don't which means I can't do any serious development on it.

So, back to the Thinkpad. With Lenovo's announcement that they will sell the T60p with Suse pre-installed I am assuming this means I can finally buy a Thinkpad without paying the Microsoft tax. Combine that with the amazing improvements of Linux on the desktop spearheaded by Ubuntu and it all means that my Apple experiment is coming to an end after about 18 months.

Of course now I need to figure out how to navigate the Lenovo ordering process. It doesn't appear that they have this non-Windows T60p available yet. Probably need to wait until after Linuxworld next week. Will also need to figure out whether EPP (employee) or SPP (stockholder) pricing is cheaper, or if there is some other mechanism to get a bit of a discount. How about an AOSD (Annoying Open Source Developer) discount?

Posted by Rasmus at 11:18