

# netPad in the Caribbean

by Tim Williams.

It is pure folly to spend eight hundred pounds or more on a second hand 32 mb Psion when for the same or less, I can buy a spanking new Apple iBook with its DVD player and 30 GB of memory. But that is the irony of good technology: the more indispensable it becomes, the more you are willing to pay for it...



## Revo

Since I bought my first Revo in 1999, the ER5 has become my pocket OS of choice. Unfortunately, neither the Revo nor the 5mx have proved reliable machines.

Every Revo, even my most recent with upgraded memory and battery, has been victim to the inopportune turn-off syndrome. After less than five months, the lovely 5mx series came down with a broken cable.

## Teacher

As a teacher, I need my er5. All my classes are there in sheet form. In a staff meeting, I have immediate access to pupil information and averages.

I also have my Collins French dictionary, the Tome Raider Oxford dictionary and the all the Psion's spell checkers. I have (an admittedly sluggish) Encarta and Mobipocket's Larousse mini dictionary of French. For personal use I need the excellent ABP, I need the jotter pad, the agenda and the address book.

When my Revo broke down and I was in London two years ago, I bought both a Jornada and a Palm Pilot. I couldn't stand the Jornada because it was pretending to be a Psion but wasn't. The Palm ended up as an alarm.

So when my most recent Revo went on the blink, I looked into the Netbook as a reliable alternative but I decided against it - both for its size and weight, but above all because it has a hinge and a cable.

Thus the only remaining option was the Netpad. Some models were available at Clove but after I'd filled in the form, Chris Love wrote to say he had sold out. So I bought one from Christoph Pulster at 1000 Euro plus tax and a month later, at the end of January 2004, my Netpad arrived here.

## Ancient OS

Unfortunately, it shipped with an ancient OS and the default stylus option was way off. It took me a long time to realize that I had to reset the option before the screen worked properly.

Also unfortunately, the machine came with a defective backup battery. Thus each time, I triggered, unwittingly or unwittingly a hard reset, the stylus setting was lost.

Equally bizarre was the way that the machine was defaulted to a 30 second turn off.

Once I got the machine up and running, I realised I had to sort out the problematic OS. This was a herculean task because the machine gave its OS as 1.04 when there was nothing earlier than 1.1 on the Psion Teklogix site.

### **Frustrated**

I tried flashing the oldest and the newest OS but neither would upload from my MMC card into the machine. Frustrated, I contacted Teklogix via email and by phone and I was told the only solution was to send the machine to Europe for updating. Not very helpful.

Finally, I discovered that all the Netpad OS were on the site and that my OS was not, as stated on the machine, 1.04 but 1.4. Once I realised this, I was able to update my machine, going through three version flashes incrementally -



you can't jump.

### **Bar-coding Pupils**

With the machine now working properly, I needed to download all the applications from the Teklogix site - minus the internet stuff and the scan application which would work on my Netpad. (At the moment, my pupils refuse to be bar-coded.)

### **Macintosh - JPL**

Connecting the Netpad to the Macintosh is a hassle. I have a Keyspan serial/usb interface and I have the excellent freeware Java Psion Link. JPL works faultlessly and fast with the Revo but not with the Netpad dock.

To have a stable connection, I am forced to bring the connection time down from the fastest speed to the slowest - which is very slow. Things are a little better if instead of connecting

via the dock, I connect the cable directly through RS232 socket.

The line is more stable but fiddling with the rubber cap that protects the socket on the Netpad is difficult and time consuming.

### **Mac OSX**

Clearly the best option for connecting to the Mac is by using the MMC card. So I bought a card reader and found that instead of having to wait ages while the Netpad connected to the Mac, I could now transfer several megabytes of information in a few seconds. The only problem is now that the underlying Unix of the Mac leaves unnecessary trash files on the card.

### **Up and Running!**

Now my machine was up and running, I could decide whether the Netpad was a viable alternative to a Revo or a 5mx.

Obviously there are two major aspects of the Netpad which distinguish it from the Revo and 5mx: its weight and the absence of a keyboard.

### **Colour Revo Wishes**

The weight is not really an issue. Although the Netpad is twice as heavy as the MX and although it won't slip into any pocket, it is a lot lighter than the Netbook and weighs about the same as the Newton. (Hey,

wouldn't it have been great if Psion had produced a Revo with a colour screen and a memory card. And was reliable. The dream machine in a shirt pocket.)

### **Virtual Keyboard**

More problematic is the lack of a keyboard. There is a virtual keyboard but from the start it has proved temperamental and loath to accept any user preference.

During my Revo years I never used the tactile screen. A keyboard man, I had speeded things up by a judicious use of Macro5 which allowed me to shortcut to most of my applications. Now for the Netpad I needed a macro launcher that would be triggered by screen taps.

### **Neuon's Merlin**

In the Revo days, I would never have looked at Neuon's Merlin because it was totally redundant for my uses. Now it was a godsend.

The Netpad has four hard keys: escape, return, up/down/left/right button and on/off. Before long I had set up a Merlin menu bar with all the key presses that were so desperately missing: tab, menu, space delete. I then set up a menu containing exit, copy, cut, paste, select all, find and undo.

Suddenly life became a lot easier.

Until Merlin, working on a Sheet file was nightmarish. The Netpad has its resident keyboard but often (not always) tapping on an insertion dialogue, a slightly different keyboard is called up. Unlike the resident keyboard, this one fills up the entire screen and can't be ignored. Now having access to customised key presses, I could avoid using the two keyboards and make inserting text a lot faster.

### Atelier's Graffiti

Writing on the Netpad will never be as fast as on a Psion keyboard - that is a fact of life that Christoph Pulster warned me about before selling me the machine. (A nice lad, Christoph - <http://pulster.de> - he sent me candy and a postcard of Heidelberg with the machine. Very useful.) But once you're actually in a Word file, the keyboard is OK.

A bit slow, but I find it less error prone than the physical keyboard of the Revo. I have also been playing with Atelier's Graffiti which is a handwriting recognition programme. (Remember the Newton?)

Although fascinating and amazingly intelligent, the programme is slow and no serious alternative to typing. So what are you supposed to do

when you need to take down information - fast and fiddling with the virtual keyboard is out of the question?

### Doodle & MyNote

Doodle (shareware) or MyNote (freeware) allow on-the-fly note taking with the stylus. One caveat, however. The Netpad's screen, in keeping with the Netpad's 'ruggedized' philosophy, is pretty thick and less sensitive to the stylus than the Revo's.

Sketching with the stylus can be... er, sketchy and sometimes lines don't come up on the screen. At others, you can get a weird straight line half way across the screen that you never asked for.



Clearly note taking is very necessary and on my Merlin menu there is a direct button that calls up MyNotes.

### Macros

Another box buttons allows me to access the most common applications - contacts, sheet, word, abp and jotter. Another box button gives me access to macros - date, time, kill and soft reset.

A very useful button allows me to navigate to four destinations of



choice: C disk root, D disk root, C disk System and C disk School folder (with all my classwork).

Another button ( which is supplied as a Merlin plugin) takes me to the System button that allows me to see all the running applications.

### **NSwitcher**

I use the System button less now that I have installed another excellent application from Neuron - this one freeware. NSwitcher allows me to go from one running app to another and is wonderfully stable.

The only problem is where to put it on a screen that is permanently threatened with heavy duty clutter. Top right is not a good idea - that's where you have the System's System

button. Bottom right is not a good idea because that's where the Extras bar pops up and would hide it. Bottom left is a possibility but I like to be able to click on the C/D disk navigation button that is down there.

So I now keep it in the top right hand corner and although this can interfere with the first column of menus, I haven't really been inconvenienced.

What I have not been able to put in the Merlin bar is a shortcut to the keyboard. In a way, this shouldn't be necessary, since the keyboard has its own hard screen button (to the right of the screen) that will turn off and turn on the keyboard. But I am left handed and would prefer some-

thing more readily accessible to my left hand.

### **Sunny Beach**

And using the Netpad?

One thing is certain - text entry and navigation will never be as fast as on the Revo. But the machine does come up trumps in other ways.

It is nice to hold. It fits comfortably into the hand and can be used anywhere thanks to the contrast and brightness options. So I can use it on a sunny beach - hey, guys, I live in the Caribbean - without my having to look for a shady spot.

Likewise, it is not afraid of the sand or the damp, given its rugged body. Reading eTexts becomes a reality rather than a possibility. (Unfortunately, although the system screen can be displayed in portrait mode, the Psion applications are all stubbornly horizontal.) [The PDF viewer from mBrainSoftware.com allows screen rotation by degrees - Ed].

### **Colour Screen**

A colour screen is undoubtedly a luxury after the grey of the Revo. The MMC/SD disk gives me access to a world of applications and files. (One complaint - the D 128 mb disk is slow - but I suspect this is a problem with the disk rather than with the Netpad.)

Perhaps most important, there is no hinge and no cable on the Netpad. Hopefully, then, the Netpad is the most reliable as well as the most expensive of er5 machines. That is a premium I am more than willing to pay for.

Whatever happens, I'll keep you posted. For the time being, I'll turn this thing off, put down the rum punch and go in for a quick dip before posting this off to the Psion Computer Journal.

Tim Williams

Guadeloupe, French Caribbean