Contech Logic keyboards

Originally arranged to slow you down the QWERTY keyboard now fronts most computer interfaces and is the short-cutters weapon of choice. ROB JAMES looks at further ways to speed you and your workflow up.

NO MATTER WHAT the sphere of endeavour, be it audio, video, graphics or 3D design, there is no escaping the personal computer. Leaving aside the craft skills these disciplines require and regardless of medium, they all have one thing in common. To do anything useful users must communicate their intentions to the machine. At the high end, the computer(s) are often hidden behind a completely customised user interface designed specifically for the purpose, such as an audio mixing or lighting console, a vision switcher, an intercom or monitor controller. Notwithstanding, a lot of very serious software uses the QWERTY keyboard as the primary interface.

The majority of humans have ten fingers arranged in two groups with a useful degree of separation and articulation (and opposable thumbs). With patience and diligence fingers can be trained to perform an astonishing variety of complex tasks with high precision and speed *(Like shuffling cards and getting the wrapping off a DAT. Ed)*. In some cases, these feats of dexterity are dictated by technology's inadequacies. The humble QWERTY keyboard is a good example of this phenomenon. This arrangement of keys was deliberately designed to slow down an accomplished typist to compensate for the latency of the early mechanical typewriter. Despite the fact that the original problem has long been overcome *(Digital latency anyone? Ed)*, the QWERTY layout has proved to be remarkably durable and difficult to dislodge.

Before Windows and the Mac WIMP interfaces were developed, keyboard shortcuts were *de-rigueur*. You couldn't get very far without learning a bewildering array of combinations, most of which were specific to the particular software package. Some shortcuts became standardised — Ctrl + C and Crtl + V are now used in virtually all software. But, when it comes to the more esoteric functions, the user is obliged either to use the often pitifully slow WIMP interface or to learn complex shortcuts for repetitive tasks.

It is perfectly feasible to design and build application specific control panels, but this approach can be prohibitively expensive. A much more cost-effective solution is to modify what we already have, which is where the Logic keyboards fit in. For around UK£65 plus VAT (a little more for Mac versions) Contech supply decent quality QWERTY keyboards with custom coloured and engraved keycaps for a wide variety of video, audio and design applications. Functions are grouped by colour and the keycaps are engraved with their normal functions and their application specific ones. Each keyboard is dedicated to a single software package. Declaring an interest, I bought one for Adobe Premiere several years ago and found that it made the learning curve a great deal shallower. It was also a great help when returning to the application after a long break. If time is money, this is a real no-brainer.

This time I had a Sony Vegas version to try out. Again, the colours and ideograms proved very helpful in getting to grips with the new application.

However, this approach is still a compromise. It relies on the default set of keyboard shortcuts applicable to the software. If you are already expert in one application then switching to a new one with different shortcuts for familiar functions can be really hard work. Also, many users find themselves employing more than one application on a regular basis. Remembering which shortcut to use in which application is a real headache. For live and near-live work dedicated keys for certain controls, such as transport, are highly desirable. Contech has an answer to these problems — customisable and programmable keypads.

I had an 8 x 8-matrix version to evaluate. For UK£198 (+ VAT) you get a very smart, low profile keypad in metallic charcoal with 64 high quality Cherry switches. These are in a different league to the usual PC or Mac keyboard in terms of positive and satisfyingly tactile action. You also get a bag of 72 engraved and coloured keycaps and if that isn't enough, another bag of 72 clear keycaps. A small application, ChangeMe, is included for programming along with LabelMe to produce custom printed inserts for the transparent keycaps.

LabelMe allows text and bitmap images to be used and individual keys to be coloured appropriately.

(You can most likely 'borrow' bitmaps from within the target application, if you know where to look.) An inkjet or laser can be used to print and careful slicing will produce perfect labels. Getting to grips with ChangeMe takes a little while but it is logical enough and the Help file deals with the less obvious aspects.

Key mappings are stored in the module itself and can be tested and verified. Once programmed no additional software need be installed on the operational PC. One word of warning, if you want to use one of these with a KVM switch, make sure it works with your specific switch.

There are four possible 'layers'. Used with programmed modifier keys these could be used to extend the number of functions or with locked modifiers to provide different mappings for alternative applications. LEDs indicate the current layer. Thus layer 1 could be Vegas, layer 2 Edius, layer 3 Nuendo HD and so on with the same keys performing the same actions where these are common between applications.

A small plastic tool is provided for removing complete keys. It is much easier to disassemble keycaps from keys when they are removed from the keyboard.

Other matrix sizes, horizontal and vertical double, and quad keycaps are all available. These along with custom engraved keycaps can be specified at very reasonable extra cost.

For users who spend most of their time using one application the Logic keyboards are a very cost-effective way of improving productivity. Especially for live work, the programmable keypads offer a more satisfactory answer without going to the expense of dedicated hardware. It's also good fun; big boys' Lego!

In summary, it enables you to programme those pesky three-fingered salutes to single, dedicated keys with meaningful labels/graphics. If you've ever cursed the QWERTY and its 'shortcuts' this is exactly what you need. ■

PROS Two affordable levels of improved control; programmable keypads are much cheaper than proprietary controllers; keypads flexible and future proof.

CONS Logic keyboards could be heavier; keypads don't work with all KVM switches; not a lot else.

EXTRAS Logic keyboards are available for a wide variety of applications including:

Adobe After Effects; Adobe Photoshop 7.0; Adobe Premiere Pro; Adobe Premiere 6.5; Apple Final Cut Pro/HD; Apple Final Cut Pro G5; Autocad; Avid Xpress DV/PRO/HD; Canopus Edius/ NX/SP-DV; DPS Velocity; Emagic Logic Audio Pro; Media 100l / HD; Pinnacle Liquid Edition; Sony Vegas; Steinberg Cubase/Nuendo.