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Child's play for Cambridge inventor

by Ben Fountain

● Ex-Microsoft employee goes into publishing

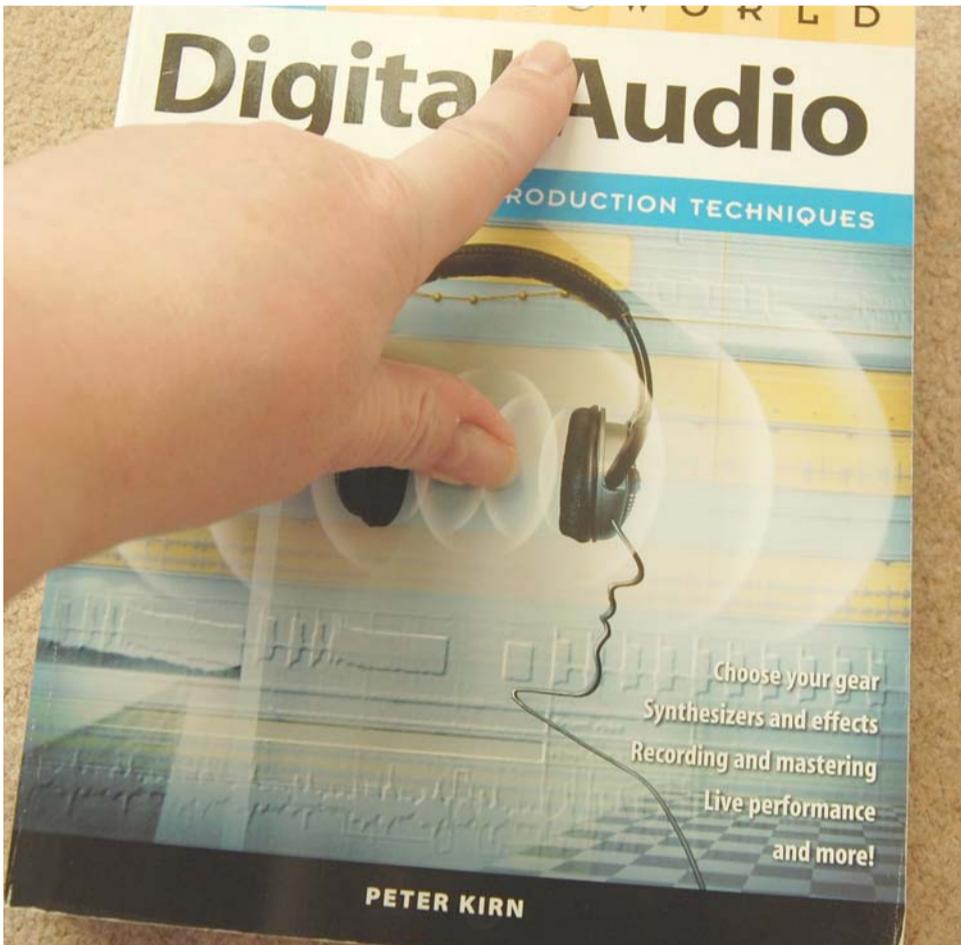
A Cambridge inventor – made redundant by Microsoft Research last year – has teamed up with a local book publisher to launch a range of computer-enhanced children's books.

Lyndsay Williams, who formed Girton Labs after being handed her P45 by Microsoft in the summer of 2007, is collaborating with Cambridge children's book publishers, Zusa on the first commercial application of her SenseBook platform.

Although precise details of this particular iteration are not yet being released ahead of an official launch of the technology at a trade show early next year, the idea behind it is to augment the information contained in an old-fashioned paper and ink book (or in this case, more likely cloth or board and ink) with digital information – be that music or other audio, or the loading of a web page on a PC, activated via a wireless link.

"There isn't a huge amount of interactivity built into existing children's books beyond the odd squeaker. We aim to change that by creating a compact, self-contained SenseBook that can tell a child whether their answers to questions are correct or incorrect, for example."

The SenseBook is powered by a credit card sized computer, embedded in the book, and cheap motion sensors. These sensors allow



A sensor embedded in a copy of Digital Audio magazine, for which Lynday Williams is a contributing author

the book to know when it has been picked up and when a page has been turned. Williams said: "The sensors used in the SenseBooks are similar to, but much cheaper than, the accelerometer used in something like the iPhone. These can be manufactured for between one and two cents each as opposed to about two dollars each."

The books are to be manufactured in China, with unit shipments "in the hundreds of thousands range" targeted initially. Williams will receive royalties on book sales as part of the deal with Zusa, but plans to license the technology in other applications.

Williams says the project is part of a creative arc that began

with the SmartQuill – a computer in a pen capable of digitally transcribing handwriting that she worked on as a research fellow at BT's research labs at Martlesham Heath in Suffolk. That basic patent was bought by Apple in March of this year and bundled into the iPhone and iPod Touch.

SenseBooks are part of a fam-

ily of 'Sense-prefixed' technologies – many of them developed during Williams' time at Microsoft – that are aimed at improving life for Alzheimer's sufferers and their carers.

The SenseCam is a small wearable camera that produces a visual log of the key events in the user's day and is being used in a number of research projects in a range of fields from memory loss to machine learning; SensePaper is a very low cost digital reminder card to help people remember key events or keep appointments; while SenseBulb is an extremely sensitive, yet cheap, wireless heat sensor, funded by EEDA, that can notify the family or carer of an Alzheimer's patient by text message, triggered by a wide range of emergency triggers.

All of these projects are at least at working prototype stage, but are being placed on hold while Williams seeks to establish the mass-market credentials of the SenseBook. She stresses though, that she welcomes approaches from potential funders.

"My approach," she says, "has always been focused on useful computing, rather than just research. My goal of improving user interfaces with the use of sensor technology is an extension of that."

"And now that I am working for myself, I don't have a manager looking over my shoulder saying 'Oo, that idea is a bit wacky,' – I can be much more creative. That is very important when you are trying to look at least five years ahead."

"Needless to say that Girton Labs is more influenced by the way Apple thinks than the way Microsoft thinks."

Healthcare firm raises £2.6m funds

Cambridge ophthalmology specialist, Digital Healthcare, has raised £2.6 million to fund expansion into new international markets as well as widen its existing core products and services.

The Alliance Trust led a consortium of existing investors which included YFM Private Equity, Noble Group and Elaia Partners, lifting the total raised by Digital Healthcare to date to £7.2 million.

Digital Healthcare provides software and related services for very large scale population eye screening and technology to manage information and images in clinical ophthalmology.

In the UK care of over 1 million diabetic patients are managed using Digital Healthcare's OptoMize product with 39 regional Diabetic Retinal Screening Schemes providing screening to detect early and previously undiagnosed signs of diabetic retinopathy and other causes of blindness.

In the US the company's Retasure service to detect signs of retinopathy in diabetic patients is used by nearly 900 physicians in 19 states.

Mike White, investment director at YFM whose British Smaller Technology Companies VCT2 fund provided Digital Healthcare with £510,000, said: "As the original backers of Digital Healthcare, YFM has seen the business develop to become the leading provider of diabetic screening software to the National Health Service."

"Following its success in the UK, the company is now rapidly building a position in the emerging and much larger US diabetic retinopathy screening market."

"With a world class management team and software to match, we are confident that Digital Healthcare has a very bright future ahead."

Pub retailer bought out of administration by management team

Britain's fifth largest pub retailer, St Alban's based Orchid Group, has been bought out of administration by its existing management team, saving at least 5,300 of the group's 6,500 staff according to administrators from PWC.

No sooner had the group

fallen into administration than it was back out after PricewaterhouseCoopers agreed a sale of the majority of the business to a new company led by Orchid's management team as part of a financial restructuring the company has undertaken. The Orchid Group formed

in April 2006 when private equity firm, GI Partners, acquired 290 managed pubs from Punch Taverns for £571 million though it has suffered with the rest of the industry over the last two years.

David Chubb, partner at PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP

and joint administrator of The Orchid Group together with Mike Jervis and Colin Haig, said: "Through the sale of the business, we have been able to save at least 240 of the group's pubs and 5,300 jobs across the UK."

As part of the main trans-

action an option to purchase the remaining sites has been sold.

The administrators are hoping these will be able to continue and they are now working with the purchaser to seek and secure the survival of the remaining 48 pubs.



Ken Savage of Perrys, with Richard Ingram, Partner

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