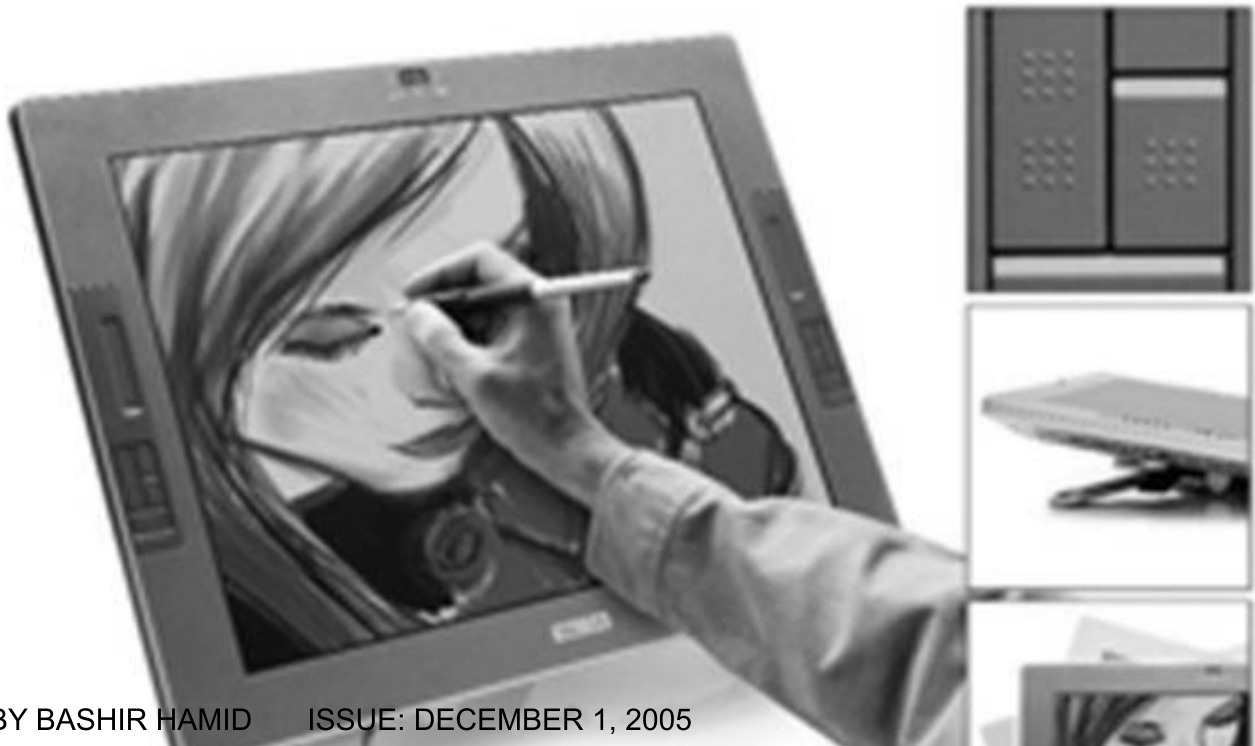


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BY BASHIR HAMID ISSUE: DECEMBER 1, 2005

REVIEW: WACOM'S CINTIQ 21UX CONTROL PANEL

The Cintiq 21UX is Wacom's latest offering aimed at revolutionizing the interface between graphic professionals and digital-scape. It boasts a large 17-inch x 12.75-inch actual work area, 1600 x 1200 high-resolution display, coupled with 1,024 levels of pen pressure sensitivity. On each side of the screen are four fully customizable buttons called ExpressKeys (eight total), and a Touch Strips (two total). Unlike the Intuos3, the Touch Strips here don't respond to the pen, but instead are finger-sensitive. The Cintiq 21's screen is bright and features Wacom's battery-free, pressure-sensitive pen technology. It shows in the specs... and price.

HANDS-ON

The Cintiq 21 was obviously developed around the concept of a hands-on interface, both literally and metaphorically. Literally, I rest my wrist on top of the screen as if it were a drafting board. Metaphorically, I am immersed in the applications, able to press buttons with the ease of pointing. This offers a lot for those who come from a traditional design or art background. The screen is now the canvas, and the pen is the brush.

Wacom's pen technology flows flawlessly with the Cintiq. Pen pressure and tilt are adjustable in the control panel, and it works seamlessly in software packages like Adobe Photoshop. The Cintiq's functionality extends further than just graphic applications. Common tasks are easier with the hands-on interface. After the first week of having the Cintiq, I was

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effortlessly navigating folders, browsing the â€”net, editing timelines in Adobe After Effects, matte-painting in Photoshop, adjusting simulations in RealFlow, and modeling in Z-Brush - all with the pen and little or no use of the mouse.

CONTROL

The Cintiq's custom controls make the comfort curve and user adaptability a lot smoother. Its drivers offer a range of customizable parameters able to be mapped to the ExpressKeys and Touch Strips, as well as the pen's DuoSwitch. These parameters can be further customized into profiles that are application specific. For example, I created a Photoshop profile that mapped brush size up (the "]" keyboard shortcut) and brush size down (the "[" keyboard shortcut) to the left Touch Strip. This profile is only active while interacting with Photoshop, and during standard interface the Touch Strip returns to default scrolling. In another profile I mapped the ExpressKeys to shortcuts in After Effects that expanded effects, keyframes and transformations of a layer. Customizing the ExpressKeys to applications was crucial to using this Cintiq's interface, helping to minimize and almost eliminate any need for the keyboard.

DUAL DISPLAY

I initially set up the Cintiq 21UX as a secondary monitor on a horizontal dual display. It was a suitable approach, which gave me the landscape workspace I needed for most applications. When I wanted to use the Cintiq as a canvas, I could pull the Cintiq closer (via convenient wheels on its back legs) and change its alignment to a flat surface with the levers located behind the screen. When I was finished, I could adjust the Cintiq back to its regular position as a LCD monitor.

After a week, I decided to approach the Cintiq in a different way: as a vertical dual display. I adjusted the Cintiq into a flat surface position about ~30 degrees and placed it in front of me. The CRT monitor I placed behind the Cintiq. The Cintiq was set as my primary display and I used the CRT as the secondary. Several little perks can be found in existing software to make interaction in dual display better and fun. For instance, Nvidia display drivers have features like "throw windows" and "mouse gestures" for dual displays. Just grab a window by the title bar and throw it into the CRT monitor. Gesture a mouse movement and all windows collapse. Also useful, Windows XP comes with a keyboard that can be accessed on-screen through the accessibility options.

A key feature of the dual display is the "mode toggle" button: a customizable parameter that can be set to any of the pen's DuoSwitch buttons, which allows you to switch from pen mode to mouse mode. This parameter is a must if you are using a dual display because it's the only way to change the Cintiq's interface to a normal tablet and control the mouse on the CRT desktop (unless of course you are using dual Cintiqs or a Cintiq/Intuos combo). I found that the "mode toggle" parameter can only be mapped to one of the Duo Switch buttons - meaning I had to give up either middle or right mouse click functionality. A minor drawback, since those mouse clicks can be mapped to the ExpressKeys on the sides.

DRAWBACKS

There are few adjustments with the Cintiq that I have no doubt Wacom is already addressing in its next models. The Cintiq 21 TFT active-matrix LCD is very clear and bright, too bright, in fact. If you are like me and bury your face into the canvas, then I recommend setting its contrast and brightness down while using it in its flat surface alignment. As a normal LCD, its brightness is fine. Also after a while of hovering over the display with my forearm on the screen, the Cintiq 21 can get hot. I made use of a strategically positioned fan during long artistic ventures.

I also tried to use the Cintiq on my lap, but at 22.4 pounds, coupled with the heat issue, I returned it promptly to its stand. And with a \$2,499 price tag, you don't want to drop it.

FINAL GRADE

The Cintiq series has definitely gone through a growing process, and the 21UX is best among its class and competition. I give the 21UX an 8 out of 10 (10 being a Minority Report-type of computer interface). If you have the money to spend, get it.

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