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cool 2 know: The XPOD

Thanks for the memory

BY LINDSAY BLAKELY
MEDILL NEWS SERVICE

November 22, 2006

In the fantasy world of every iPod user, there's a playlist for every moment, a soundtrack for every day.

The drawback - it takes a lot of time to build those lists. But what if MP3 players knew when to play your uniquely perfect soundtrack before you requested it?

This particular feature is not yet available from the Apple machine or any of its competitors, but a PhD student at the University of Maryland-Baltimore County is working hard to change that.

"I don't like making playlists," said Sandor Dornbush, the 27-year-old researcher behind what he has named the XPod, or "human activity aware learning mobile music player."

Dornbush, who studies data mining and ubiquitous applications, is in the midst of researching the possibility of a music player that would "learn" users' listening preferences and play the right song for their moods.

A consumer would have to spend a short period of time training the XPod while it collected physical data, such as skin temperature, amount of sweat and pace. At the same time, the listener would demonstrate through genre, time of day and beats per minute the songs he or she likes and when to play them.

Eventually, the machine is supposed to link all the data and make "smart" choices about what the listener wants to hear.

Dornbush is pleased with his results so far and the positive reaction to his early findings at the International Conference on Mobile Technology,



Applications and Systems in China last year. He's slated to present updated findings in January at a conference in India.

The research division of Nokia was sufficiently impressed with the idea to donate two 5500 Sport phones for Dornbush to test as prototypes. Nokia's phones play music, record some physical data during a workout, such as pace, and give audio feedback.

So far, neither Apple nor Microsoft is latching onto Dornbush's idea, but he still has hopes.

"I don't think I'm going to come out with a brand-new music player or that I'm going to destroy Apple - that's kind of silly," Dornbush said. But maybe "Microsoft would be interested in getting a leg up on Apple."

Microsoft unveiled its own music player, Zune, last week. But Apple already has made a foray into body sensory technology in its partnership with Nike and its iPod-compatible shoes that record workout data.

Now that he is working with cell phone prototypes, Dornbush is full of new ideas for how to synch music with a listener's actions. He said cell phones could use global positioning systems, text messages and phone numbers to make song selections.

But he's drawing a blank on a low-tech problem - what to call his new device.

"I know Apple isn't going to be very happy about" XPod, Dornbush said.

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