

THE TECH LIFE

FROM LIGHTS TO CAMERAS TO AMBIENCE, A WISCONSIN VACATION HOME CAN BE REMOTE-CONTROLLED FROM CHICAGO

BY LISA SKOLNIK TRIBUNE PHOTOS BY BILL HOGAN

Estate of the art



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Imagine turning off an accidentally tripped burglar alarm from miles away. And opening your home's garage door so the delivery man can leave your packages in a safe spot while you're still at work. Or coming home from Florida in the dead of winter, feeling the chill and turning up the heat in your house on the ride home from the airport.

Chicago residential developer Keith Keating can do all this, and much more, in his new Powers Lake, Wis., home. Other wonders he can work by remote control include seeing who's coming in and going out every door; setting and altering temperature and light levels room by room or all at once; playing audiovisuals in every room; having one movie or tune follow him from room to room without losing a beat; copying and storing up to 1,000 DVDs on a dedicated server; and opening or closing the shades on dozens of windows.

Best of all, he doesn't ever have to worry about pesky fees from setting off false burglar alarms. "I can always see who's there," he says. Should he not be watching, cameras in the house and stationed on the property record everyone's comings and goings.

Keating got the idea for his super-

In Colleen and Keith Keating's sleek, 8,000-square-foot residence, computerized touch screens operate all the lighting, climate, media, security and remote access systems.

smart home when he saw motorized blinds displayed at a builder's show last year, while his place was in the planning stages. "I knew we were going to have lots of windows because the lot overlooks the lake," he says. "Then I saw those new blinds, and thought about adjusting the shades on all those windows—especially if it was sunny out. It would have been a lot of work."

But operating the blinds would have been just a fraction of the work, given the nature of the home—a double residence built as a single, interconnected entity to accommodate his huge family. Keating and his wife have the upstairs suite, his parents live downstairs and his five other siblings and their children come for weekends and use the guest rooms.

In all, the home spans 8,000 square feet on three levels, has a 1,700-square-foot rooftop deck and sits on an acre lot. For now, the family uses it primarily on weekends, so Keating wanted to be able to control everything from his office in downtown Chicago.

During the planning stages, he quickly realized that operating the lighting, climate, media, security and remote-access systems for all that square footage would be overwhelming.

"All I could do was picture my father, who just wants to flick on a switch, running around working all these different systems. I realized they had to be more than just user-friendly or it would be impossible to take care of everything."

In fact, the home would have required more than 400 light switches alone, "which could confuse anyone," says Eric Wolfram, chief technology officer for Integrisys Group, the Chicago technology company that Keating hired to handle the job. "Without a control system you'd have to hunt and peck for the right button. And with all those windows, you'd have to constantly adjust the settings on

the blinds too."

For the record, Wolfram wants us to know that "smart home," "e-home" and "wired" do not accurately describe this kind of house. "This is called a fully integrated home," he says. "Those other words are jargon because they can mean anything. Put a dimmer on a lamp—it's smart. Hook everything up to one remote control—you're wired. But typical homes, especially media rooms, don't have much control or integration. This is something totally different."

Banish the thought of pushing, flicking or clicking wall pads and remote controls in a fully integrated home. And forget about seeing any of those beefy equipment boxes that do all the work. Every system in the house is controlled from sleek little wireless touch screens that look like keyboard-less mini-laptops, mounted on minimal stands.

All the heavy-duty equipment that would detract from the aesthetics is relegated to utility closets or, in the Keatings' case, a pantry-sized basement room.

The screens offer a range of options with each touch. For instance, the button to turn on the TV also activates the cable box and surround-sound system, presents channel choices and can dim the lights. Push "music" and choose from 100 digital audio channels, CDs or plain old radio.

The system also handles the complexities of adjusting the lighting, heating and cooling systems to the nuances of season and time of day, but grants leeway for changes at any time. Anyone feeling cold or hot, or in need of more light, can adjust it on the touch screen. Or anyone in a hurry to set the stage can select from pre-designed lighting scenes for entertaining, gaming, watching television and more.

There is a potential downside to all this computerization, of course. "The cable connections the system relies on for remote control can go down, or there can

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SMART STARTS

Though a fully integrated home with lots of bells and whistles can cost \$50,000 or more, a smaller budget can go a long way. Here are some ways to get started suggested by the pros at Integrisys:

FOR \$7,000

Do one room right. Start your media room with a wireless touch screen, surround-sound receiver, five-channel speaker system, five lighting dimmers and a DVD library-management system that handles up to 400 discs. This price includes all installation. A plasma or LCD screen is extra; a high-performance 42-inch, which is ideal for a mid-sized media room, starts at about \$2,200.

FOR \$15,000

Wire the main living areas in a typical 3,000-square-foot home (three to four rooms) with a system that includes an audio receiver, an MP3 streaming music system (which stores about 4,000 CDs and offers easy access to whole tracks or individual tunes), 10 programmable lighting dimmers, a touch-screen control, climate controls and the ability to access the system from a web browser (for those away from home). Another \$5,000 gets you two security cameras and the media-room system described in the \$7,000 item (a bargain now that you can use some of the same controls). But again, screens aren't included.

Language

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Every day I dip into the sea of computer speak and come up dripping.

I was thinking about this the other morning while **accessing** my **e-mail**, at the same time **downloading** the contents of the new Black Eyed Peas CD to my **hard drive**, so that I could **burn** it onto a **blank disk** using **iTunes**. I do a little **podcasting** before the taking of toast and tea, meaning that I use collaborative software (iTunes) to play music on my **iPod** and other **MP3** players (from MPEG-1 Audio Layer 3, a digital-encoding format invented at the University of Hanover, Germany, in 1991). I then can share it with my daughter, who actually likes Peas.

Most of the highlighted words above have become part of our language. We've known for a good while that a "hard drive" is not just a lengthy car trip to grandmother's house with a backseat of brats, and that we "download" things to our computers (and "upload" when we send things out). Recently we've learned that to "burn" something is to copy its data to a CD or to a **DVD**, an optical disk storage device similar to a CD, but of higher density, with a built-in file system. Unlike CD (compact disk), DVD doesn't stand for anything, though some refer to it as a "digital video disc" (a limited definition since it also holds nonvideo data). It was a compromise acronym decided on by the consortium of giant electronics companies that agreed on its format in 1995. They were hoping to avoid the kind of format struggles that plagued Betamax and **VHS** (which, **btw**, officially stands for Video Home System but originally stood for Vertical Helical Scan, after the head-tape technique it used).

Many techno terms are examples of what the online resource **Wikipedia** calls portmanteaux: words that carry or blend the meanings of two words, like **cell phone** or **podcasting**, a combination of "iPod" and "broadcasting" that means to distribute audio and video programs via the Internet. Wikipedia itself is a portmanteau of "**wiki**," a collection of material visited online using collaborative software, and the dead-tree word "encyclopedia." ("Dead tree" refers to print media, like that which you hold in your hands.)

Some techno words become uniquely punchy

House

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be a glitch in the wireless connections," cautions Wolfram. Consequently, every system has back-up controls that allow it to be run manually or separately, and also has an uninterruptible power supply to keep it running for six hours in case of power outages. Regular maintenance keeps the system upgraded and updated.

Keating's priority was on making the home as user-friendly as possible, and he left it up to Integristsys to make it happen.

"Keith wanted everything to be simple to

verbs. You fisk someone online by offering a detailed rebuttal of what they've written or said, a process named for Robert Fisk, Middle East correspondent for the British newspaper *The Independent*. People in the **MSM** (mainstream media) don't like it that their articles and programs can be instantly fished online. (Ask Dan Rather and Martha Mapes.)

There are definite trends in technological language. For instance, in the 1990s, the letter "e" (for "electronic") was a popular prefix, as in "e-mail," "eBay," "eTrade," and other Internet-related enterprises. Eventually, the "e" brands became diluted, lost their zip. In our new century, the It brands are "i" brands.

Apple Computer has very successfully marketed iPod, a compact digital music player. In referring to this device, the company never uses the definite article. This is intentional. While builders of condominiums insist on giving their luxury shrines names like *The Tennyson*, *The Royal Sheridan*, etc., the Apple people want iPod to be kind of mythic, sui generis, in the clipped, cryptic techno way. Thus, no "the." The "i" coinages began with the introduction of the iMac, a version of the Macintosh computer that was Internet-ready, hence the "i." Apple has since created any number of "i" products: iSight, iChat, iTunes, iDVD, iBook. There are also various non-Apple knockoffs, like iHome, a clock radio for docking your iPod, and iPal, a radio with an outlet for your iPod, and so on. There is even talk, or **cyberchat**, about an iGeneration, presumably of multitasking, technologically superliterate young people perpetually nodding along to their **earbuds** (the tiny earphones for iPods). But as numerous companies try to take advantage of the halo effect cast by the iPod, even the lowercase "i" is now in danger of dilution.

The makers of a fancy DVR (digital video recorder) for satellite TV didn't take any chances naming their new device. They went straight to a branding agency. They wanted something friendly, not technical, but related to TV. Hence, TiVo (pronounced TEE-vo), cute-sounding but with the core message headlined in uppercase letters, clearly a concept dreamed up by Madison Avenue types, not geeks.

The most fascinating techno language of all, really, is the day-to-day language of the Web

use because there are so many different people using it, and it took quite a few steps to do it," notes Wolfram.

Keating points out that the users include his computer-averse father and lots of small children. "I know it took lot of work, but they did it," Keating says. "Even my dad can figure it out." □

Lisa Skolnik writes about interiors for the Magazine.

RESOURCES Integrated systems: Integristsys Group, Chicago; **Interior design:** Diane Racine, Keating Development Group, Chicago; **Security system:** Alarm Detection Systems (ADS), Aurora; **Lighting consultant:** Anne Kustner Lighting Design, Evanston; **Electrical work:** Inland Electric, Joliet; **Architecture:** Hartshorne + Plunkard, Chicago.

Marketing

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would believe only in a God that knows how to dance." A surprising sentiment from the likes of Friedrich Nietzsche, but it seems even brooding, 19th Century German philosophers might appreciate the joyful dancing behind iPod's "Silhouettes" advertising campaign. *Ich bin ein hipster?*

The campaign won one of advertising's highest awards this past June, the Grand EFFIE. The award honors a product of popular culture whose breakthrough marketing campaign sends sales skyrocketing. With 30 million iPods sold since the product launch, Silhouettes would seem to qualify.

"It's commonplace in our business to say that products are made in factories," says Michael Coleman, "while brands are created in the hearts and minds of consumers." Coleman is a managing director at Anthem Worldwide, a brand-strategy and design firm, and an open admirer of what Apple has accomplished.

"Apple has what we call 'badge value,'" says Coleman, "like carrying around a Starbucks cup or driving a BMW."

If Coleman is right, other music players must have the badge value of a Dunkin' Donuts cup. Ever heard of the MPMan? It was the first MP3 player out of the gates in the long-ago summer of 1998, but competition from iPod drove it out of the U.S. market. A newer entrant, the iAudio X5 from Cowon America, has features the iPod lacks, like an FM tuner and a voice recorder, but *Sound & Vision Magazine* recently labeled it a "strikeout," complaining of its cumbersome interface and tiny screen.

Are Apple's competitors really this inept, or are consumers just being manipulated by Madison Avenue? Michael Gartenberg, vice president and research director for personal technology at Jupiter Research, argues, "Marketing cannot save a mediocre product from mediocrity," and he believes Apple simply makes a better product. He ticks off the three things that set the iPod apart: long battery life; easy integration with iTunes downloads; and form factor—how the iPod looks, works and feels.

The mystery, Gartenberg says, is why it took so long for other tech companies to catch up. "Battery life, size, ease of use—other companies didn't get that right until recently. By then iPod had already become a cultural icon."

Marketers clearly appreciate technical wizardry, but what they really love is the swagger. "The brand embodies an attitude—rebellious, savvy, iconoclastic, individualistic," says Coleman.

Not coincidentally, those are adjectives frequently used to describe Apple CEO Steve Jobs. Says Gartenberg, "Jobs is a brilliant marketer and visionary and can articulate the power of the products." The secretive buildup to Apple's dramatic new product introductions hypnotizes techies and competitors alike, leaving them either salivating or trembling at what innovation Jobs and crew will produce next. "The Apple team doesn't just 'get' being cool," Coleman says, "they are cool. It's in their DNA."

Lately, Jobs has found new ways to torment his competitors. Just as other manufacturers were gearing up to offer their own versions of