MY WEIRD PROMPTS

Podcast Transcript

EPISODE #412

Beyond the Mouse: Why Our Keyboards are Stuck in 1870

Published February 01, 2026 • Runtime: 26:31

https://myweirdprompts.com/episode/computer-input-device-evolution/

EPISODE SYNOPSIS

In this episode, Herman and Corn dive deep into the surprising stagnation of computer input devices, questioning why we remain tethered to the mouse and QWERTY keyboard despite decades of innovation. From the specialized world of 3D navigators and medical trackballs to the high-stakes future of brain-computer interfaces, they examine the tension between ergonomic optimization and the "gravity" of the status quo. Discover why the "gorilla arm" effect killed gesture control, how "vibe coders" are using voice to build apps, and whether we'll ever truly move beyond the plastic puck on our desks.

DANIEL'S PROMPT

Daniel

"I'd love to chat about the world of computer peripherals beyond the standard mouse and keyboard. There's been a lot of ingenuity in the different devices humans have designed for computer control—like vertical mice, trackballs, space mice, and macropads—but none of them have really stuck. I'm curious to hear about who is actually using these gizmos and what you think about the future of computer control. Is the keyboard here to stay, or will voice or some other technology eventually take over?"

TRANSCRIPT

Corn

Well, if you could hear the background noise in that audio, you know exactly what is happening at our place right now. Boxes everywhere, the sound of packing tape being ripped off the roll at three in the morning, and Daniel fueled by enough caffeine to power a small city. It is moving season for our housemate, and as anyone who has lived with Daniel knows, his collection of gadgets is... well, it is extensive.

Herman

Extensive is one way to put it, Corn. I prefer the term eclectic. I am Herman Poppleberry, and I have spent the last four hours helping Daniel decide which of his twelve different pointing devices actually deserve a spot in the new apartment. It is a fascinating look into the mind of someone who refuses to accept the standard mouse and keyboard as the pinnacle of human-computer interaction.

Corn

It is funny because Daniel mentioned that vertical mouse he got on a recommendation from an artificial intelligence. I remember when that showed up in the mail. He looked like he was holding a plastic shark fin. But he swears by it now. It really got me thinking about why we are still so tethered to these input methods that were essentially designed in the nineteen sixties and seventies. We have neural networks that can generate art and code, yet most of us are still pushing a little plastic puck around a desk and tapping on a grid of buttons.

Herman

You are hitting on a really deep tension in technology, Corn. It is the battle between ergonomic optimization and the massive gravity of the status quo. The standard keyboard layout, QWERTY, was literally designed in the eighteen seventies to slow down typists so the mechanical arms of typewriters would not jam. That was over one hundred and fifty years ago! And the mouse? Douglas Engelbart's first prototype in nineteen sixty-three was a wooden box with two metal wheels. We have refined the materials, but the fundamental interaction has not changed for the vast majority of people.

Corn

Right, and Daniel’s prompt asks a great question: who are these other gizmos actually for? He mentioned the trackball and seeing it in a medical setting. I have noticed that too. Whenever you are at the doctor’s office getting an ultrasound or a scan, they always have those giant, glowing trackballs built into the consoles. Why is that? Is it just because they do not have desk space to move a mouse around?

Herman

That is a huge part of it, but it is also about precision and durability. In a medical environment, you are often working in a very cramped space, and a mouse requires a certain amount of clear real estate to operate. A trackball is stationary. You can bolt that thing down, and it stays put. Plus, from a hygiene perspective, it is much easier to clean a stationary device than a mouse that is dragging its belly across a potentially contaminated surface all day. But there is a deeper ergonomic reason too. Trackballs allow for very fine, incremental movements using just your fingertips, which is exactly what you need when you are measuring a tiny cyst on an ultrasound or navigating a complex three-dimensional scan of a brain. Radiologists and video editors are the secret power users of the trackball world.

Corn

That makes sense for specialists, but what about the rest of us? Daniel mentioned his wife Hannah, who is an architect, and his failed attempt to get her a SpaceMouse for her birthday. I actually looked into those after he mentioned it. They do not even call it a mouse; they call it a three-dimensional navigator. It looks like a heavy metallic knob that floats on a base. Herman, you have actually used one of those, haven’t you?

Herman

I have! And I have to say, if you are doing any kind of three-dimensional modeling or computer-aided design, it is like going from a tricycle to a fighter jet. A standard mouse is a two-dimensional input device. You move it on an X and Y axis. To move in three dimensions, you have to hold down modifier keys like shift or control to change what the mouse movement does. It is clunky. A SpaceMouse has six degrees of freedom. You can push, pull, twist, and tilt the cap. It allows you to zoom, rotate, and pan all at the same time. It feels like you are reaching into the screen and holding the object in your hand.

Corn

So if it is that much better, why aren't all architects and designers using them? Hannah told Daniel she had never even seen one in the wild. Is the learning curve just too steep?

Herman

It is a bit like learning a musical instrument. Your brain has to build new neural pathways to coordinate those six different types of movement simultaneously. Most people try it for ten minutes, get frustrated because they are accidentally zooming into the floor of their virtual building, and go back to what they know. But there is also the issue of the dominant hand. We are so used to the mouse being the primary tool that we forget the other hand is just sitting there doing nothing but hitting the occasional hotkey. The SpaceMouse is meant to be used by your non-dominant hand while your dominant hand still uses a regular mouse or a stylus. It is a two-handed workflow, and that is a big jump for most people to make.

Corn

That is a really interesting point about the two-handed workflow. It leads perfectly into the other thing Daniel mentioned: macropads. He has been obsessed with these little grids of buttons he finds on websites like AliExpress. To a casual observer, it just looks like a tiny, redundant keyboard. But for power users, they are basically a physical manifestation of their most frequent digital actions, right?

Herman

Exactly. Think of a macropad as a physical shortcut menu. If you are a video editor, you might have a single button that performs a complex series of actions: cut the clip, move it to a specific track, apply a color grade, and save. Instead of memorizing a four-key combination or digging through a menu, you just hit the big red button. It is about reducing cognitive load. We only have so much mental energy to spend on the mechanics of using a computer. Every time you have to think about where a command is, you are taking energy away from the actual creative work. It is why devices like the Stream Deck have exploded in popularity beyond just gamers; they are the ultimate productivity hack.

Corn

I can see why Daniel is keeping those for the move. They represent a kind of personal optimization. But it brings us back to the bigger question: why haven't these things stuck for the general public? We have had the technology for decades. We have the ergonomic data showing that standard mice and keyboards contribute to repetitive strain injuries. Yet, if you walk into any office in Jerusalem or London or New York, it is ninety-nine percent standard peripherals. Is it just a cost thing?

Herman

Cost is a factor, sure. A high-quality split ergonomic keyboard can cost three hundred dollars, whereas a basic one is twenty. But I think the real reason is what economists call network effects and path dependency. Everyone learns to type on a standard keyboard. Every computer comes with a standard mouse. If you switch to a trackball or a vertical mouse, you become an alien in your own office. You cannot easily use someone else's computer, and they cannot use yours. It is a social and functional friction that most people are not willing to endure, even if it means their wrists hurt at the end of the day.

Corn

It is the same reason we still use the imperial system in the United States or drive on different sides of the road in different countries. Once a standard is set, the cost of changing it becomes astronomical, not just in money, but in human effort. But Daniel's prompt also touched on the future. He mentioned voice control and even a laser thing. I assume he means those laser projection keyboards that were popular as a gimmick a few years ago, or maybe gesture control like the old Leap Motion. What do you think, Herman? Is the keyboard actually here to stay, or are we on the verge of a total paradigm shift?

Herman

That is the million-dollar question. If you look at the history of computing, we have moved from punch cards to command lines to graphical user interfaces with mice. Each step made computers more accessible to more people. Voice control is the next logical step in that progression. It is the most natural way for humans to communicate. We have seen a huge surge in its use with the latest large language models. Voice recognition has improved significantly with recent LLMs, achieving around 95-98% accuracy in ideal conditions, but has not crossed 99.5%. We are seeing a new generation of vibe coders who literally talk their way through building entire applications without touching a key.

Corn

Right. But I still cannot imagine an office full of fifty people all shouting delete paragraph or move cell to B twelve at their screens all day. It would be a nightmare. And some things are just inherently spatial. You cannot easily describe a complex photo edit or a three-dimensional model with just your voice. You need that tactile, spatial feedback.

Herman

Precisely. Voice is great for simple, linear tasks or high-level creative dumps. But for high-resolution, multi-dimensional work, it is incredibly inefficient. The bandwidth of our speaking voice is much lower than the bandwidth of our hands. Our hands are amazing! We have ten fingers with incredible fine motor control. A standard keyboard allows a skilled typist to input data at over one hundred words per minute. Voice is barely faster, and it has a much higher error rate when you get into technical jargon.

Corn

So if voice is not the keyboard killer, what about gesture control? Like the Minority Report style where you are waving your hands in the air to move windows around. We saw Apple push this heavily with the Vision Pro, but even that has struggled to find a mainstream foothold. I heard production was scaled way back last year because people just were not buying into the spatial computing dream as fast as they hoped. Is it the gorilla arm syndrome again?

Herman

Exactly. It was a known issue back in the eighties when touchscreens first started appearing on vertical monitors. Holding your arms out in front of you against gravity is physically taxing. Moving to a purely gestural interface for an eight-hour workday is an ergonomic disaster. It sounds cool in a science fiction movie, but in practice, it is a recipe for shoulder surgery. This is why the mouse and keyboard, which allow your arms to rest on the desk, are so hard to beat.

Corn

So we are stuck with the keyboard and mouse forever? That feels a bit depressing given how much everything else has evolved. There has to be something else on the horizon. What about brain-computer interfaces? We are seeing companies like Neuralink making actual progress there. Is the future just thinking at our computers?

Herman

That is the ultimate frontier, Corn. And it is closer than people realize. As we speak in February twenty twenty-six, Neuralink is conducting early human trials with a small number of implants, demonstrating capabilities like thought-controlled cursors in paralyzed patients, but not yet in high-volume production. They have already shown that patients with paralysis can play chess and browse the web using only their thoughts. For someone with a disability, this is life-changing. But for the average user, we are still a long way from mass adoption. Your brain is a very noisy place. Trying to isolate the specific click command from the background noise of you wondering what is for lunch is a massive computational challenge.

Corn

It is also a bit terrifying from a privacy perspective. If my computer is literally reading my thoughts to move a cursor, what else is it picking up? I think most people would prefer the friction of a physical device if it means their inner monologue stays private. But let us bring it back to the present. Daniel's moving, he's looking at these weird devices. If someone is listening to this and their wrist is starting to ache, or they are just bored with their standard setup, where should they start? Is the vertical mouse actually the best gateway drug into the world of weird peripherals?

Herman

Absolutely. The vertical mouse is the most accessible transition. It does not change how the mouse works; it just rotates your hand forty-five to ninety degrees into a handshake position. This stops the two bones in your forearm, the radius and the ulna, from crossing over each other, which reduces pressure on the carpal tunnel. Most people can adapt to it in a day or two. From there, you might move to a trackball, which eliminates the need to move your arm entirely. And then, if you are really feeling adventurous, you go down the rabbit hole of split mechanical keyboards.

Corn

The split keyboard thing is where it gets really intense. I have seen people with these setups where the two halves of the keyboard are literally a foot apart, angled inward. It looks like they are operating a spaceship. But they swear it is the only way to work without pain.

Herman

It is all about alignment. A standard keyboard forces your wrists to bend outward to keep your fingers on the home row. That is called ulnar deviation, and it is a major cause of strain. A split keyboard lets your hands stay in line with your shoulders. It is objectively better for your body. The problem is that we have spent our whole lives learning to type on a flawed design. Unlearning that is a huge investment. But with the ergonomic peripherals market, including keyboards, projected to reach around $2-3 billion by 2030, more people are finally making that investment.

Corn

It feels like the recurring theme here is that our technology has outpaced our biology, and these weird peripherals are just our desperate attempts to bridge that gap. We were not evolved to sit at a desk for eight hours staring at a glowing rectangle. Our hands were designed for gripping tools, climbing trees, and fine manipulation of physical objects. The mouse and keyboard are a very narrow pipe for all that human capability to flow through.

Herman

That is a beautiful way to put it, Corn. We are trying to squeeze the complexity of human thought through a tiny plastic straw. I think the future is not one single technology taking over. It is going to be a multimodal approach. You will use your voice for some things, gestures for others, and a highly specialized physical device for the deep work. Maybe the keyboard of the future is not a grid of buttons at all, but a wearable device that senses the tiny electrical impulses in your finger muscles. You could type on any surface, or even in mid-air, with total tactile freedom.

Corn

That sounds like something Daniel would buy in a heartbeat. He would be the first person in Jerusalem walking down the street typing an email into thin air. But you know, there is something to be said for the physical, tactile nature of these devices. Daniel mentioned he likes the ingenuity of them. There is a certain joy in using a well-designed tool that feels like it was made for your hand specifically.

Herman

There is. It is the difference between using a generic kitchen knife and a custom-forged chef's knife. Both will cut an onion, but one makes the process a pleasure. I think that is why the gizmosphere, as Daniel calls it, will always exist. There will always be people who want to optimize, who want to find a better way to interact with the digital world. Even if ninety percent of people stick with the standard, that ten percent of innovators and enthusiasts is where the real progress happens.

Corn

It is also where the personality is. You can tell a lot about a person by their desk setup. If I see a vertical mouse and a split keyboard, I know I am dealing with someone who cares about their long-term health and probably has a very specific workflow. If I see a SpaceMouse, I know they are a three-dimensional thinker. These devices are not just tools; they are an extension of our digital identity.

Herman

And let us not forget the misconception busting aspect of this. A lot of people think these devices are only for people who already have an injury. But the best time to switch to an ergonomic setup is before you need one. It is preventative maintenance for your body. Most people do not realize how much tension they are holding in their shoulders and neck just from using a standard mouse until they switch to something like a trackball or a vertical mouse and that tension suddenly evaporates.

Corn

That is a great point. It is like wearing comfortable shoes. You do not realize how much the bad ones were hurting you until you take them off. I am curious, though, about the laser thing Daniel mentioned. There was a trend a few years ago of these laser keyboards that projected a red grid onto your desk. They were terrible to type on because there was no tactile feedback. You were essentially drumming your fingers on a hard table. It is a perfect example of a technology that looks futuristic but fails the basic human requirement for haptic response.

Herman

Haptics are everything. Our brains rely on that click or that resistance to confirm an action has been taken. Without it, we have to rely entirely on visual confirmation, which is much slower and more taxing. That is why I do not think touchscreens will ever fully replace physical keyboards for high-output work. The magic of a good peripheral is that it eventually becomes invisible. You stop thinking about the mouse and just think about the cursor. You stop thinking about the keys and just think about the words.

Corn

That invisibility is the hallmark of great design. But ironically, to get to that state of invisibility with a better tool, you have to go through a period of extreme visibility where everything feels awkward and slow. It is the valley of despair in the learning curve. Daniel's vertical mouse is past that valley now. It is invisible to him. But his split keyboard? He is still right in the middle of it. He is typing at twenty words per minute and cursing under his breath.

Herman

But he will get there! And once he does, he will never want to go back. It is a one-way street. Once you experience the comfort of a truly ergonomic setup, a standard mouse feels like holding a jagged rock. I think that is the real reason these gizmos stick around. They may not have taken over the world, but they have captured the hearts and wrists of a dedicated minority who know there is a better way.

Corn

So, to answer Daniel's question: the keyboard is here to stay, at least for the foreseeable future, but it might not look like the keyboard we know. It will be split, it will be mechanical, it will be customized. And the mouse? It is evolving into a whole ecosystem of specialized pointers, navigators, and trackers. The future of computer control is not one single technology; it is a toolkit.

Herman

Exactly. We are moving from a one size fits all era to an era of personalized computing. And honestly, I think that is a good thing. Our bodies are all different, our work is all different, so why should our tools be the same? If Daniel wants to use a trackball with his left hand and a macropad with his right while he dictates his emails to a voice assistant, more power to him.

Corn

Just as long as he finishes packing those boxes so we can actually move them! Seriously, the sheer number of cables involved in these setups is a whole other topic. Every weird peripheral seems to come with its own unique charging cable or wireless dongle.

Herman

Do not even get me started on cable management, Corn. That is a rabbit hole we do not have time for today. But I will say, seeing Daniel's face when he finally gets his command center set up in the new place? It will be worth it. There is a real sense of empowerment that comes from having a workspace that is perfectly tuned to your needs.

Corn

It is true. It is about agency. In a world where so much of our digital experience is controlled by giant corporations and standardized algorithms, your physical peripherals are one of the few things you have total control over. You get to decide how you touch the digital world. That is actually a pretty profound thought for a three a. m. packing session.

Herman

It is. And maybe that is why Daniel keeps buying them. He is not just looking for a better mouse; he is looking for a better way to be human in a digital age. Or maybe he just really likes the glowing buttons on the macropads.

Corn

Knowing Daniel, it is probably a bit of both. But hey, if any of you listening have your own favorite weird peripheral, or if you have managed to master a SpaceMouse without losing your mind, we want to hear about it. Go to myweirdprompts.com and use the contact form to tell us your setup. We are especially interested if you use something we haven't mentioned yet, like a foot pedal or a head-tracker.

Herman

Oh, foot pedals are a game-changer for coders! Imagine having a shift or control key on your floor. It frees up your pinky fingers for so much more activity. See? The rabbit hole never ends.

Corn

It really doesn't. But we should probably wrap this up before Herman starts ordering more gear for the house. If you have been enjoying these deep dives into the weird and wonderful world of tech and human behavior, we would really appreciate it if you could leave us a review on Spotify or your favorite podcast app. It genuinely helps other curious people find the show.

Herman

It really does make a difference. And thanks to Daniel for sending in this prompt, even in the middle of his moving chaos. We hope the new apartment has enough desk space for all twelve of those pointing devices.

Corn

Good luck with the move, Daniel. And to everyone else, thanks for listening to My Weird Prompts. We will be back next time with another deep dive into whatever strange corner of the world Daniel decides to point us toward.

Herman

Until then, keep exploring, and maybe give your wrists a break. This has been My Weird Prompts.

Corn

Take care, everyone. See you in the next one.

Herman

Goodbye!