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Product review

The first mouse in space

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Spacemouse

3Dconnexion

From £99 plus VAT

www.3dconnexion.co.uk

3Dconnexion's new creation looks set to revolutionise 3D navigation

3Dconnexion's Spacemouse controllers have been widely used in 3D design for years, but have not found their way into the architectural mainstream, perhaps because its focus is on 2D production work.

However, as working in 3D becomes more prevalent, the limitations of 3D navigation with a conventional mouse will become more apparent.

The Spacemouse is used in the opposite hand to your mouse as a complementary controller to it and your keyboard. The central feature is the "controller cap". Instead of using a normal mouse to control on-screen gadgets, you push, pull, twist or tilt the controller cap to move the camera around with pan or dolly motions that mimic real camera movements.

Acclimatising does not take long. Google Earth is a good application to start training with. Open the application and just press down gently on the controller cap to zoom in from orbit, then push, pull and twist to fly around intuitively. This gives an immediate feel for the way the Spacemouse operates. With a CAD application such as Microstation, Spacemouse is ideal for flying around to explore your design, as well as for refining camera views — replacing dozens of mouse clicks and motions.

Several models of the Spacemouse are available, ranging from the simplest, a puck featuring the controller cap, plus "fit" and "menu" buttons, to the top of the range Spacepilot Pro. All the products are quite weighty to stop them sliding around, which also gives them a pleasantly solid feel.

On the Spacepilot Pro, the controller is placed on an ergonomically profiled base littered with buttons. A pad of five dual-function buttons on the right is labelled with standard 3D rotations; a similar set of buttons on the left accepts the top 10 most useful commands for your application. The fit button brings you back to base if you get lost. Programming the buttons is straightforward. Once programmed, the files containing your selections can be shared. Some applications — Sketchup and 3D Studio, for instance — benefit from plug-ins that provide integrated menus to adjust the Spacemouse's operation.

The distinguishing feature of the Pro model is the LCD display that automatically switches to show the available commands for the active application. Change application and the display updates instantly.

The basic Spacemouse costs £99 + VAT, which will quickly be paid back by the savings in time and wear and tear on your mouse hand. Once you have one, you will not want to relinquish it!

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