Computing in the Ink Domain

(Extended Abstract)

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1 Introduction

In this paper we discuss a new paradigm for pen computing based on the notion of deferring or even eliminating handwriting recognition (HWX) in many cases. In its place, key functionality is brought closer to the user by implementing it directly in the ink domain. The primary advantage of this approach is increased expressive power, but it also results in a different class of pattern matching problems, some of which may be more tractable and less intrusive than traditional HWX.

For input and interaction, pens have many advantages: they are expressive [Mor95], lightweight, and familiar. It has been shown, for example, that a pen is better than a mouse or trackball for pointing tasks [MSB91]. But while pen-based computers have met with success in vertical markets, attempts to win mass-market acceptance (*e.g.*, GO's PenPoint [CS91], the Apple Newton [GR93b]) have not lived up to early expectations. Indeed, the most recent entry in pen operating systems, General Magic's MagicCap [Kna94], de-emphasizes HWX and exploits the pen primarily for its browsing capabilities.

There are many possible explanations for this. A lack of "killer" applications, small hard-to-read screens, excessive size and weight (in comparison to paper notepads), and short battery life are undoubtedly contributing factors. Still, the most obvious failing voiced by potential users is the poor quality of handwriting recognition software. To be fair, HWX is still a hard research problem (see [TSW90] for one survey). Some work has focused on techniques to make it easier for the user to correct the errors that inevitably arise during text entry [GG91]. Another recent approach is to make the HWX problem simpler for the computer by changing the input alphabet [GR93a, VN94]. Forcing users to learn a new way of writing, however, is a fairly drastic solution that some might not find acceptable.

For the most part, today's pen computers operate in a mode which might be described as "eager recognition." Pen-strokes are translated as soon as they are entered, the user corrects the output of the recognizer, and then processing proceeds as if the characters had been typed on a keyboard.

Instead of taking a very expressive medium, ink, and immediately mapping it into a small, pre-defined set of alphanumeric symbols, we suggest that pen computers should support *first-class* computing in the ink domain. While traditional HWX is important for some applications, there are strong arguments for deferring or even eliminating HWX in many cases:

1. Many of a user's day-to-day tasks can be handled entirely in the ink domain using techniques more accurate and less intrusive than HWX.
2. No existing character set captures the full range of graphical representations a human can create using a pen (*e.g.*, pictures, maps, diagrams, equations, doodles). By not constraining pen-strokes to represent "valid" symbols, a much richer input language is made available to the user.
3. If recognition should become necessary at a later time, additional context for performing the translation may have become available to improve the speed and accuracy of HWX.

This philosophy of *recognition-on-demand* is more distinctly "human-centric" than HWX, which reflects a "computer-centric" orientation. Figure 1 depicts the two different paradigms.

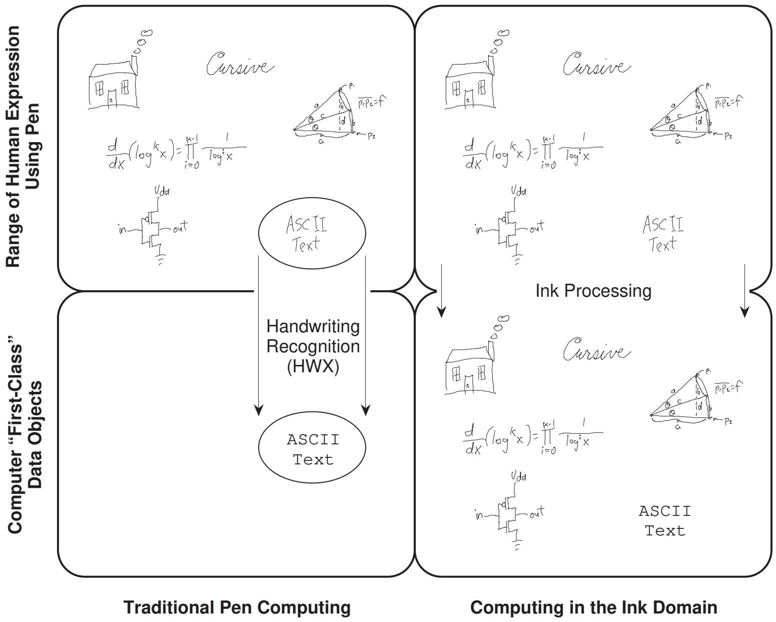

Figure 1: Traditional pen computing versus ink as first-class data.

This concept is related to the notion of "lazy" recognition put forth in [NMKS93a, NMKS93b]. However, whereas these researchers delay recognition so that it does not interfere with the creative flow of ideas, we introduce new functionality at the level of the "raw" ink, making it directly manipulable [LT93a, LT93b, LT94].

2 Informal User Studies

To test writing speed, we had seven experienced computer users enter a short passage of English text from Mark Twain's well-known novel, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court.* The subjects entered the same text in four different ways: typing it in a standard word processor using their preferred keyboard, writing it with a regular pen on a paper notepad ("analog" ink), writing it in "raw ink" mode on an EO 880 pen computer ("digital" ink), and, finally, writing it on the EO using its built-in HWX software. The results of this study are presented in Table 1.

		Ink		
Subject	*Keyboard*	*Analog*	*Digital*	*HWX*
1	37.9	27.6	21.4	7.6
2	55.6	27.8	22.4	7.6
3	55.9	23.8	22.4	14.1
4	44.0	24.8	22.8	7.1
5	42.5	31.4	20.6	7.9
6	26.4	27.5	21.3	9.1
7	78.5	28.2	26.4	9.6
Ave.	48.7	27.3	22.5	9.0
Std. Dev.	16.6	2.5	1.9	2.4

Table 1: Writing speed test results (words per minute).

Interestingly, writing with a pen seems to be an "equalizer" – there is much less variance in writing speeds between users than with a keyboard. For most people in our small study, there was a significant slow-down moving from the keyboard to a pen. It should be remembered, though, that these are computer users and hence typing is second nature to them; even so, one subject actually wrote faster with a pen than with a keyboard. It is also encouraging to note that writing on a pen computer is not much slower than writing on real paper. However, as expected, HWX greatly slowed text entry for almost everyone.[1]

We were also interested in studying how legibly people write, and how this relates to HWX performance. We had each of eight subjects write several sentences on an Apple Newton MessagePad in "guest" mode, with the recognition preferences set to "mixed cursive and printed." Before beginning the test, they were asked to grade their own writing on a scale of 1 (very neat) to 5 (very sloppy). After the test, a sample of each subject's writing was graded (anonymously) by all of the other subjects on the same scale. Table 2 gives the results of this informal survey.

Although the sample size is very small, it is perhaps surprising that there is not a stronger correlation between perceived legibility and HWX accuracy. This suggests that HWX makes errors that user's find unintuitive. Moreover, people invariably graded their own writing more severely than others did. Perhaps most telling, when asked to explain the cause of the Newton's errors, half the subjects assigned at least part of the blame to the sloppiness of their own handwriting. Hence, in addition to the awkwardness of having to stop and correct HWX mistakes, it seems as though pen computers make people feel "bad" about an issue to which they are already sensitive.

These studies are still very preliminary. We are currently exploring ways of measuring expressiveness, with the goal of determining a range of specific applications for which digital ink is superior to other media.

[1]Subject 3 was an experienced EO software developer, and hence his performance probably indicates a tight upper-bound on writing speed using the EO's HWX.

		Self	*HWX*	*Grade Assigned by Others*								
Subject	*Style*	*Grade*	*Accuracy*	*#1*	*#2*	*#3*	*#4*	*#5*	*#6*	*#7*	*#8*	*Ave.*
1	cursive	4	80.2%		4	3	4	3	4	4	4	3.7
2	print	3	73.8%	2		3	3	2	3	2	3	2.6
3	mix	3	78.6%	3	3		3	3	4	3	3	3.1
4	mix	3	67.5%	3	4	2		3	4	1	2	2.7
5	print	3	47.6%	2	2	4	3		3	2	3	2.7
6	print	2	84.9%	2	3	2	1	1		2	2	1.9
7	mix	5	57.1%	3	3	3	3	3	2		3	2.9
8	mix	3	71.4%	3	2	3	2	3	4	3		2.9

Table 2: Handwriting legibility test results.

3 Systems Issues

Ink has the advantage of being a rich, natural representation for humans. However, fixed character sets (*e.g.*, ASCII, JIS) are the standard representation for computer-based text; they can be stored efficiently, searched quickly, etc. If ink is to be made a "first-class datatype," it must be:

- **Transportable.** Standards like JOT [Sla93] are now being developed to make the same ink usable across a wide variety of platforms.
- **Editable.** Years of research and development have led to text-oriented word processors that are both powerful and easy-to-use. Similar functionality (including copy, paste, delete, and insert) is needed for pen-stroke data.
- **Searchable.** Computers excel at storing and searching textual data – the same must hold for ink.

While these three properties are all of fundamental importance, the last, searchability, is one we have started to address. Since no one writes the same word exactly the same way twice, we cannot depend on exact matches in the case of ink. Instead, search is performed using an *approximate ink matching* (or AIM) procedure. AIM takes two sequences of pen strokes, an *ink pattern* and an *ink text*, and returns a pointer to the location in the text that matches the pattern as closely as possible.

We have developed an approach for solving this problem: pen input from a digitizing tablet is segmented into strokes, a standard set of features is then extracted (*e.g.*, stroke length, total angle traversed), and the resulting vectors are clustered into a small number of basic stroke types. Comparisons are then performed between strings over this "ink" alphabet using approximate string matching techniques [LT94]. This search procedure has been incorporated in a workstation-based testbed we call "Notepad" – Figure 2 shows a screen snap-shot.

For handwritten text (English and Japanese, cursive and printed), empirical studies indicate our approach performs quite well. We have also recently extended it to deal with more complicated pictorial queries, and queries that are "fuzzy" in the sense that certain picture elements are omitted or repeated.

The full version of this paper will include details of our implementation, as well as user studies examining the effectiveness of AIM for searching ink data.

4 Acknowledgements

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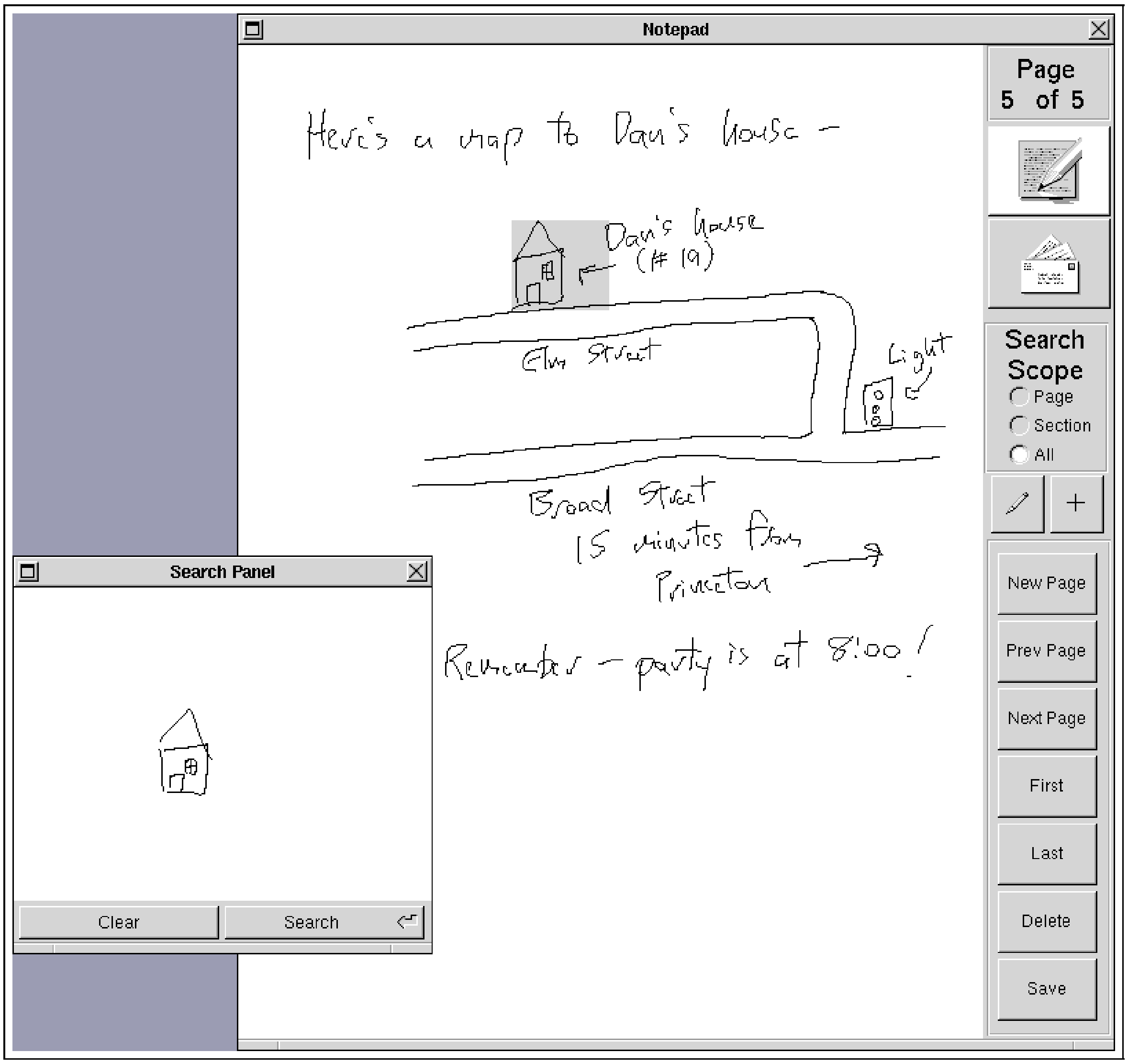

Figure 2: Notepad screen snap-shot.