

June 10, 2004

PC as Power Plant

By DOUGLAS HEINGARTNER

It began as a simple way of getting computers and other devices to play nicely together. But it has given rise to a stream of gadgets far more exotic than the printers and mice it was designed to accommodate.

Its initials have also become increasingly familiar in the digital lexicon: U.S.B., for universal serial bus.

U.S.B. ports, and the plugs that fit them, make it easier to connect devices to a computer, eliminating screwdriver-heavy tasks and the need to reboot the computer every time a new piece of equipment is plugged in.

But perhaps most important, two of a U.S.B. cable's four wires carry not data but juice: enough current to run small to midsize gadgets with no need for batteries or AC adapters.

Eight years ago, when the technology first appeared, U.S.B. meant keyboards, joysticks and the like. But manufacturers began cottoning to U.S.B.'s ability to provide a power source, leading to a host of gizmos that have nothing to do with computers: radios, reading lights, even massage balls and air purifiers.

And as Scott Smith of the online retailer ThinkGeek (www.thinkgeek.com) points out, the universality of U.S.B. (that's what the U stands for, after all) means fewer international adapters for globetrotters to lug around.

Though many of the latest arrivals fall at the absurd end of the gadget continuum - like a U.S.B. flash drive shaped like a rubber duck - many are innovative, even ingenious: a U.S.B. cellphone charger, for example, lets you use your laptop for on-the-road S O S.

So the next time a blackout hits, your laptop's robust battery might find itself powering more than just your palmtop.



Copyright 2004 The New York Times Company