



Wayne Caswell, in the company of his cat, Cornflake Von Bearon, sets the controls of his Active Home software, which allows him to program his home security alarm, lights, temperature control and more.

HOME AUTOMATION STATION

PC software lets you turn on lights or feed fish – even if you're not home

BY LORI HAWKINS

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When Wayne Caswell needs a glass of water in the middle of the night, he doesn't have to worry about feeling his way downstairs in the dark.

He simply pushes a small remote control on his bedside table, and the kitchen light turns on to greet him. When he heads back upstairs, it turns itself off.

The system also turns down the thermostat when his family goes to bed and runs the security system for his far Northwest Austin

home. And that's just the beginning.

Three years ago, Caswell, a consumer strategy planner at IBM Austin, allotted himself a \$10,000 budget and began adding computers, wiring and a home theater and security system.

Caswell is one of a growing number of people who have caught the home automation bug.

The concept isn't new – the Smart House designation was trademarked in 1984 by a nationwide collection of builders, manufacturers and utilities companies.

Home automation systems, which handle voice mail, security systems, lights, thermostats and appliances, have been available for

years, but only recently have they become easy and affordable enough to appeal to middle-class homeowners. Austin, with its strong techie demographics, is a natural place for it.

"People here just love this stuff," said Mike Smith, co-owner of Mesa Home Automation on McNeil Road, which sells home automation products. "They understand the technology; they see how easy it is; and they want this stuff in their homes."

Typically adding a security, lighting and energy management system costs \$1.50 to \$2 a square foot. But prices vary widely depending on the extent of the system.

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Most automation systems are controlled by embedded micro-processors and can integrate stereos, heating and cooling, security, phone systems and more. They can be activated by telephone, which means a homeowner can turn on lights or air conditioners from work.

Bill Gates' 40,000-square-foot mansion near Bellevue, Wash., is an example of just how far you can go. It features a zone of light that follows people from room to room; music and video images that move around the mansion; thermostats that set themselves according to the outside temperature; and wall screens that can be set to display millions of pieces of art and video.

The remote electronics are activated by lapel pins worn by each person in the house. Phones also are programmed to ring only in rooms near someone wearing a pin. There's even a "video wall" that has 24 projectors and monitors.

It's a little cheaper to have home automation built into a new house, rather than having an existing house retrofitted with the necessary switches and wiring.

Big budgets are not required. "It's something that anybody can do," Caswell said. "You don't need a showcase house to justify it because you can really spend as little as you want."

For Caswell, the appeal is being able to apply technology to real life. "I guess I'm kind of a futurist," he said. "I love the fact that this is possible."

His wife, Yvonne, a part-time school nurse, is not a futurist, but she gradually has warmed to the system. Her favorite feature kicks in at Christmastime, when the outside lights come on automatically at dusk. She's not sold on thermo stat control, because it turns down the heat when the family leaves but stops there.

"If it knew when to heat it back up, it'd be perfect," she said. "The idea behind all this is to make

your life easier. Most of the time it does."

The Caswell's system is made by Home Automation Inc. in Metairie, La., and operates from a console in the living room wall.

Other features in the Caswell home include a hand-held remote control that lets them change compact discs and adjust the stereo volume from across the house. The videocassette recorder is tied into the system, enabling family members to watch a movie being played downstairs in any room with a TV.

Caswell even has automated the feeding of the fish in his son Adrian's aquarium. A battery-operated device feeds the fish twice a day and the home automation system turns the pump off at the same time so the food isn't sucked into the bottom filter.

"They might sound like small things, but they are things that you don't have to think about anymore," he said. "We never have to come home to a dark house. I like knowing that."

The screen of Wayne Caswell's IBM Aptiva shows how easy it is to set all the controls in his house – including the aquarium timer that feeds his fish.

