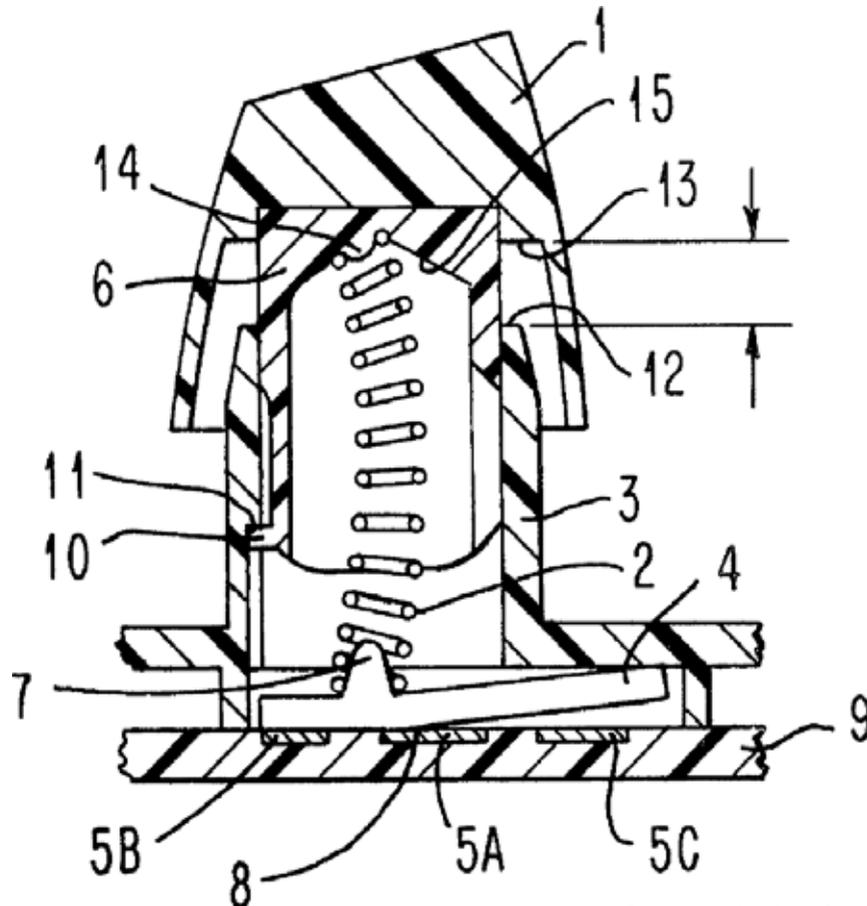


# Sound of Finger and Mind

By Ray Hu



Richard Hunter Harris, United States Patent #4,118,611, 'Buckling Spring torsional snap actuator', 1978

A Brief History of the Keyboard Click

'Our writing equipment takes part in the forming of our thoughts', mused Nietzsche, referring to his Hansen Writing Ball, an early typewriter dating back to the 1860s. A century later, philosopher Vilém Flusser also considered the typewriter a part of his thinking process. 'He rejected electric and electronic typewriters because he objected to the noises they made,' relates architecture critic Martin Pawley. 'Flusser [preferred] manual over automatic machines, claiming that the silence between keystrokes coupled with the physical act of returning the carriage left to right, left to right, punctuated his thoughts at the correct intervals for composition.'

One can only wonder what the Czech thinker would say about today's 140-character attention

span, apropos thumbs gliding across the same QWERTY schema, abbreviated to the size of a small Post-It note. The uncanniness of this bee dance is only compounded by the de-spatialised, wooden cluck of each keystroke. More like the click of a tongue than that of a key, the audible feedback is a shadow of a skeuomorph: Buried deep in the iOS subconscious, the audio file is tellingly known as 'tock.aiff', implying that it is in fact half of a metronomic binary, digitally decoupled from source and cadence alike to spite Flusser's conceit of 'correct intervals'. The sound of thought has been reduced to an afterthought; silenced by most users, 'Keyboard Clicks' simply cannot compete with the algorithmic reassurance of autocorrect.

There were, of course, intermediate steps between the philosopher's fetish and the silence of the keys. Introduced in 1984 – well within the final decade of Flusser's life – the IBM Model M is coveted to this day as the nonpareil of computer keyboards. Based on 50 years of expertise in mechanical typewriters, Big Blue's patented 'Buckling Spring torsional snap actuator' is calibrated to ~60g of tension, the sweet spot of button-pushability, such that a decisive stroke of each perfectly weighted key is synchronised with its click.

Even in the inferior 'rubber dome' keyboards of the 1990s, the depth of 'key travel' yielded a telltale sound, like raptor claws on linoleum (not to mention the graveyard of crumbs in the interstitial

crevices). The mini-mastaba has since been flattened into a Scrabble tile, the scissor hinge of its itty-bitty innards like a cross between a director's chair and the belly of a beetle. Indeed, the insect scuttle of the latest computer keyboards is but a vestige of the bygone tap-dance of typing.

So too do we increasingly twiddle at a metaphysically flattened keyboard, sealed under glass, its disembodied 'click' a rather more dubious act of preservation. In an onomatopoeic 2013 op-ed in the *New York Times*, typewriter enthusiast and actor Tom Hanks echoed the aphoristic musings of Nietzsche and Flusser; The following year, he apotheosized his avocation with the Hanx Writer, developed by

Hitcents. Listed in the 'Productivity' category of the App Store (where it briefly topped the charts on launch), it is more or less what one might expect from a typewriter app: old-timey keyboard skins paired with rickety sound effects.

If the IBM Model M represents the evolutionary link between the typewriter of yore and the keyboard of today, Flusser presciently identified the former with a more fundamental shift. Taking sound to be the hallmark of a legible machine interface, he sees (and hears) the

typewriter as a chattering nexus of natural language and computer code, an audible threshold between analog and digital. 'Only since we have calculated have we had machines (typewriters, for example), and we could not live without machines, even if we tried', Flusser declared. 'We are therefore forced to calculate rather than to write, and if we insist on writing, then we have to go "click".'

Now, as the saying goes, there's an app for that.

